

The Birth of Evil

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A/N: Book 6 revealed that Tom Riddle could control magic long before he got his wand...so can this Harry. A retelling of the salient points of Harry's life, from Book 1 onward.

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The young man stood up from his seat and stalked forward with a tremendous smile on his face. He bowed his head as a thick bronze necklace was placed upon his shoulders. The thick metal plaits – one for every person to wear the necklace – reached to the middle of his back.

His smile grew even brighter. Some traditions were merely stupid...but this one was worthy of abolition.

He walked to the front of the dais and held his wand to his throat.

“I accept the office of Minister of Magic.” A cheer went up through the crowd. The campaign had been short and decisive. No one wanted to run against the Boy-Who-Lived.

“I returned to Britain after my post-Hogwarts journeys ready and willing to inspire some change in the land of my birth. What did I find? No new businesses started in twenty years; a handful of families in charge of everything. It was impossible to do anything new without paying massive bribes to people who already had tonnes of galleons. We were dead, but we didn’t know it yet.

“I was a Ravenclaw in school, so indulge me for a moment if I engage in a minor history lesson. The earliest forms of wizarding government were all based on power; four powerful families would make peace treaties with each other or a dozen or thirty one families in a major type of war. Eventually two hundred twelve formed a lasting peace treaty, incidentally forming the first real wizarding government in the world, the Wizengamot. At that time, it was designed to ensure every powerful magic user had a voice in government – safer than a

bunch of disgruntled wizards rebelling. But as time passed and our traditions changed here and there, our government did not grow and adapt. Our problems now began for us hundreds of years ago. Stagnation kills.

“Enough, I say. Enough.

“I would like to use my opening remarks to lay out my first five days in office. Today, I will be dissolving the Wizengamot as it is undemocratic and has fallen into such disrepair that it had not been able to form a quorum of its membership in four years. Tomorrow, the election season for the Wizard Parliament will open. Fifty seats; each will serve for seven years or until the next election is called, whichever comes first. Tomorrow, we will also be closing four entire Ministry departments and seven additional offices. The business of government has become bloated; we will return to our simpler roots. On Wednesday, every remaining employee at the Ministry of Magic will be eligible to reapply for their jobs. We want only the best working here; we’re going to be a small, lean organization. We have no room for hangers on or the wretched and useless.”

The crowd hadn’t been expecting any of this so they didn’t know how to react. This Harry they’d elected was a touch different from the candidate they’d met.

“On Thursday, each candidate for the newly constituted Wizard Parliament will have public interviews here in Diagon Alley, also broadcast over the Wizarding Wireless. On Friday, the election will occur.

“In addition, as a further temptation for every witch and wizard of age to come vote at the Ministry, the Department of Mysteries will open for a public tour and inspection during the day. There has never, to my knowledge, been such an opportunity. I hope the curious will come – and vote – and then see some of what the Unspeakables been working on for so long. Our government needs to be more accountable, you understand, so this tour is just the first of many changes to how the Ministry does business.”

The idea of visiting the Department of Mysteries was an attractive one. Quite a few witches and wizards applauded.

“Welcome to the revolution, gentle witches and wizards.”

Harry Potter removed the wand from his neck and returned to his seat. He began that Monday morning a term as Minister that would stretch for years.... He was a mere thirty three years old, the youngest Minister of Magic ever elected.

Harry Potter was invincible by this point in his life, though others saw a young, possibly naïve young man who wasn't exactly suited to politics. Others thought they served as his opposition; thought they rebelled against him. But not really. Harry pulled their strings even without their knowledge and consent.

But it was not always so. Harry Potter was not always powerful. He became so. He evolved. Here is his story.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter learned of power a few weeks after his sixth birthday. His cousin Dudley's friend Piers Polkiss, a bully of the first order, stepped in front of a lorry carrying milk to the corner store and died. Just because Harry wished that he would.

The boy had helped beat up Harry earlier that day and was coming back for a second helping on his own. The pure anger that welled up inside of Harry was enough for something inside him – some blockage – to snap. From that moment, Harry had power. Invisible power.

Lots of children believed – or hoped – that they could fly or turn people into insects or become invisible. Harry discovered that day...and in the days to come...that he really could do these sorts of things. It wasn't just in his mind. It was his mind acting on the world, too.

The half dozen people on the street at the time saw Piers chasing after a ball and ignoring the shouts and yells for him to stop. The lorry

threw the boy a dozen feet into the air. (The driver later topped himself in his grief.)

No one ever thought Harry had any culpability, not even the Dursleys.

After all, Aunt Petunia had seen the whole thing from her customary viewing spot in the kitchen. The freak had been weeding near the back garden when that poor Polkiss boy had his horrible accident.

When Harry was nine, Vernon Dursley died in a single car collision on his way to a sales appointment, just because he'd broken Harry's collarbone the night before. This time Petunia knew Harry had something to do with it, even though her husband had been fifteen miles away when it happened.

But she couldn't say a thing, could she? She knew the freak was a wizard, but no one else knew of such things. Her husband died, the insurance paid out triple as it was an accident, the company gave her even more for her husband's death on the job.

Petunia Dursley never raised her voice to Harry again. She had to almost beat her son Dudley to work the same concept into his mind. Harry was dangerous, even if no one else in the neighborhood or the school could see it. Petunia let Harry spend all his free moments reading...anything to keep him calm.

She waited and wished for the freaks to come calling. She wished they'd come drag him off to that school Hogwarts today. He couldn't get any worse than he was now, could he, even if they taught him things?

He already knew how to murder. How could it get any worse?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter took up residence in the Hogwarts library after he was sorted into Ravenclaw. His Aunt had explained about the wizarding world a bit after Harry turned ten. He'd had to wait a long time to come to Hogwarts, but he was ready. First of all, he wanted to know the names of the things he could do...even without his wand.

He was well into his second week of classes before he found a thin volume called Unbounded Magic. It had a very disparaging view of wands and gave a series of arguments for building one's capacities to perform magic without the 'hindrance' of a wand. That was the first time Harry understood he had been performing conscious, willful, wandless magic since he was six.

It was unusual, according to this old book, and powerful.

He vowed then never to get so dependent upon his wand that he lost the skill he currently possessed. He waved his hand at the book and it flew back to the shelf it came from. A few days later, Harry plucked a nice dark stick from the ground near the greenhouses. He spent a few days making it look like his wand. Then his real wand went into his trunk and Harry began to use an old stick – and true wandless magic – for his classwork.

Of course, he wouldn't tell anyone about this particular decision, either. Harry prized his privacy and his secrets.

He was well into October before he stumbled across the names for his ability to speak with animals, especially snakes. Being a parselmouth was considered a dark trait, as if anything could be adjudged light or dark in a vacuum. Another secret to keep.

Finally, he saw a tiny book hidden behind larger volumes on a high shelf in the library. The Animal Within. Harry was an animagus, had been for a long time. His crow form had allowed him to follow 'Uncle' Vernon two years ago and cast the bit of magic that incapacitated the man behind the wheel of a rapidly moving vehicle...to his death.

Knowledge like this was powerful. He knew what was what now...and began to plan to ensure no one ever learned of his skills. Harry was nothing if not cautious. Sure, he did stupid things, but he didn't get caught. Not ever.

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Harry Potter stalked out of the hospital wing ready to kill. The year had been going great until that blasted troll at Halloween almost killed his sort-of friend Hermione and then the first Quidditch game of the year had happened. Harry enjoyed the action from the stands, even with the unsportsmanlike conduct Slytherin used to demolish Gryffindor.

A pair of bludgers broke out of the case Madam Hooch just secured them in. Both of them came straight for Harry, who was just about to walk out of the stands. He ran, but it did no good. He dived so that one bludger broke his arm, rather than his head. The second one missed his chest by only a few inches. Two Ravenclaws jumped on one; Dumbledore pulled out his wand and blasted the other one. The shrapnel would possibly leave a permanent scar on Harry's face.

When he stood up, bleeding and cradling his broken arm, Harry saw only Quirrel and Snape looking aghast and...something else, something not quite normal.

One or both were guilty, Harry didn't care. He just wanted the problem solved. He'd already killed two bullies in his short life, who would care about another two?

Harry disappeared from the hallway and a crow flew off into the distance. He'd looked more into the animagus magic and decided that the present theories were all wrong. Harry had first managed the transformation at age eight, when hiding out from a pair of older bullies. The way the books explained, it was a miracle anyone ever became an animal. Either it was easy, as Harry found in a moment of necessity, or it was hard: Harry was proof that only one theory was right.

Quirrel was easy to find in his fourth floor office. Harry sent out the same kind of pulse from his hands that had incapacitated Vernon Dursley in his last car ride. Quirrel slumped to the ground.

It took only a few moments to drag Quirrel down a flight of stairs to the third floor. Harry opened the forbidden corridor and tossed Quirrel inside. He'd already thoroughly investigated the Cerberus. It would make short work of an unconscious man.

Harry locked the door and a crow took to the air again. It swooped outside and then down to the narrow slit windows the dungeons used. He hopped around on the ground for a good few minutes before he discovered where Snape lurked.

Harry stayed in crow form as he cast his next spell. (The fools who wrote the books Harry had read on animagery said that the animals couldn't cast spells. Wrong. Apparently the 'experts' didn't know what they were doing.)

Snape suddenly got up out of his seat, completely against his volition, and began the walk to the third floor corridor. Harry was using the very first bit of magic he'd ever perfected, the bit that allowed him to control Piers Polkiss as he walked in front of a milk lorry.

Harry flew up to the Ravenclaw tower through an open window and settled himself into his bed. There. Done. One of the two was guilty...and both were terrible teachers...so Harry had just served himself and the pursuit of knowledge quite well.

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Harry had mixed feelings in his first meeting with Horace Slughorn, Snape's replacement as a Potions Instructor. The man obviously knew his stuff, but he seemed to be wheedling his way into Harry's good graces. He did it well, but Harry was a powerful observer.

It took a few weeks before Harry understood that Slughorn was a collector – of famous names to drop, of favors to collect upon someday in the future, of little anecdotes to amuse his more famous, or powerful, or useful students. There was something useful in the practice, even if Slughorn was particularly unctuous in how he went about doing it. He couldn't have been subtle if his life depended upon it.

Harry began to realize that he would necessarily be limited in what he could learn and know – but he could push those limits by befriending others. Because of his upbringing, Harry had never had friends, but now he had a reason to try. He liked Hermione well enough and was

friendly with her, as he was with the Nott boy in Slytherin and several folks in Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff.

Perhaps having...friends of a sort could be useful to the things he wanted to do. Perhaps. Harry decided he would try.

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Harry's mind had turned again to that strange Cerberus and what might be hidden up there. The bodies of Quirrell and Snape had long been cleared away and pained announcements made to the school. But the dog was still there.

What was Dumbledore hiding?

A research laboratory, perhaps. One didn't need a special place to research Transfiguration, any old research journal and a nook would do. But he was also an Alchemist, wasn't he?

More experiments, perhaps?

Dumbledore had been an alchemist for eighty years, but had done his most profitable work with Nicholas Flamel... Hold on, Flamel. The Philosopher's Stone. Was that old madman stupid enough to hide the summit of alchemical practice inside Hogwarts?

Harry had to find out.

It took him three weeks to put his plan together. On the first of February, he struck. His partner in crime? A particularly mirthsome house elf who cleaned the Ravenclaw tower at night and supervised the making of the pumpkin juice during the day.

Harry provided the happy elf with several prank items and the creature gladly applied them to the teacher's supply of pumpkin juice, wine, and water. Witches and wizards underestimated house elves. The little creatures enjoyed jokes and making merry.

“Remember, Terribeth, the clear one goes in the water; the brown one goes in the wine; and the yellow one in the pumpkin juice.”

The elf squeaked and seemed so pleased.

Harry paid particular attention at dinner to who drank what. Luckily, Dumbledore had both water and wine with his dinner. Harry knew that the man wouldn't voluntarily be moving for a few days – at least any further than his private bathroom. The clear liquid was a powerful bowel loosener sold to Muggles; the stuff in the wine was the wizarding solution for the high colonic irrigation that some Muggles paid major money to have done; the yellow liquid was the true prank item, turning its drinker's hair purple and skin sallow green. Zonko's sold it by mail order.

Harry watched as the head table cleared out long before the students were finished with their meals. No teachers would be roaming the halls tonight, not even that vile Mr. Filch. He liked water, juice, and wine with dinner.

Professor Sprout's hair and skin color changed before she made it out of the hall. Four tables full of children began laughing as hard as they could.

The Professors would chalk all this up to a particularly effective prank, wouldn't they?

Harry waited until the last prefect patrol was over before he donned the Invisibility Cloak he'd received for Christmas. The note accompanying the cloak had been unsigned, but a quick reading of the magic in the paper revealed Dumbledore's signature. Muggles used fingerprints to learn the secrets of who did what; the magicals used signature reading spells, but only had the option if the magic was recent. Within twenty-four hours all the residue would be gone. Dumbledore apparently expected Harry wouldn't know about that and hadn't bothered to write his note and deliver the package a day or two earlier to truly avoid detection....

Three steaks from the kitchen kept the Cerberus amused while Harry disappeared down the trapdoor. A small circle of Devil's Snare disappeared under a fire spell. (It would regrow itself within hours, the vicious weed.) The room with the winged keys was the easiest by far

to enter, as Harry removed the hinges from the door and then replaced them, once through. Harry levitated the chess pieces off to the side. When he smelled a disgusting troll, he threw the Cloak back on and walked slowly through the room. In the trapped room with the potions, Harry used a simple Flame Repelling Ward – not taught at Hogwarts, but described in its library as a way to protect wizarding homes – to create a hole in the flames. He collapsed the wards once he was through into what seemed the final room.

A large, ornate mirror stood alone in the room. Harry stepped in front of it. An impish mirror-image Harry opened his hand with a large red stone in it. Harry opened his own hand and saw that the Philosopher's Stone was now his. What a worthless protection – the whole lot of them, but especially the mirror. It just handed the prize over.

Harry wondered if he could study the Stone long enough to make his own.... What a way to begin his alchemical studies.

Harry took a few minutes to admire the stone and then decide upon how to cover up its theft. He pulled out his wand and summoned a stone from the ceiling. Harry stepped back and let gravity do its worst. The stone fell and crashed into the side of the mirror, sending the whole contraption to the floor. The silvery mirror exploded into a few thousand pieces – which Harry had shielded against – and the room looked perfect.

“Now, how am I getting out?”

He could easily return back the way he came, but the more he thought of it, someone like Dumbledore wouldn't take the long route when he had a shortcut. He'd publicly announced the entrance to this place back in September...in order to keep a different entrance hidden.

It took only fifteen minutes for Harry to find the hidden door. He removed another set of hinges and replaced them after stepping out. He found himself on the first floor, in a broom cupboard – thankfully empty –, so he threw the Cloak back on again and made his way to a window. He put the cloak in his back pocket and transformed into a

crow. Instead of a twenty minute walk to his bedroom, he had a forty second flight. At least one of the windows in the common room was always partially open this time of year, luckily enough.

Harry hid the stone inside the battery compartment of the first radio/stereo he'd ever owned – and foolishly brought with him, not realizing that magic and electricity didn't mix well. It could serve a useful purpose this way.

The next morning only three professors made it to breakfast. Classes were cancelled and Gryffindor lost at least two hundred forty points, as every affected teacher seemed to separately punish Fred and George Weasley for their prank. Neither boy denied it. Harry barely kept his laughter to himself. Idiots and fools ruled the world.

Dumbledore didn't reappear at the head table for two more days. He looked thin and a bit gaunt. At least he never got the purple hair. Six teachers had discovered that the purple hair was permanent. Harry hadn't expected it, but everyone in the school seemed to enjoy that bit of residual fun. Terribeth the House Elf remained giddy and cheerful every time Harry saw her.

“We'll do something big next year, I promise.”

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The beginning of his second year at Hogwarts was rather annoying. A crazy house elf was stalking Harry – it had popped in at Privet Drive once to warn Harry not to return to Hogwarts, then it had obviously sealed up the entrance to the Hogwarts Express. Harry had had to take the Knight Bus to Hogsmeade, a very unpleasant ride.

Now he was in the library surrounded by hundreds of interesting things and he was stuck trying to learn about blasted house elves. He'd rather be reading up on the Mind Arts, as he'd determined Dumbledore was a master of them, or on wizarding traditions or on the legal system or on warding...the list was long.

Damned house elves.

Harry eventually found an interesting passage, after sifting through four other, worthless books.

“The founding families brought order to the British Isles during a series of wars from 832 to 927. The Goblin War of 877 led to the creation of Gringotts Wizarding Bank through the use of ritual magic binding the goblins to their servitude. The Darrish Forest War of 903 led to the permanent settlement of centaurs near to what would become Hogwarts. Finally, the most pernicious beasts, the drawn elves, were put down in 927 and bound to wizarding servitude using the only known ritual at the time that had a hereditary component. Reports over the next hundred years reported that the elves’ physiognomy changed the longer they were bound, from tallness to shortness, from brilliant thinkers to utterly servile wretches. It was a powerful act of cooperative magic, relying upon the initial 50 bonding families, each of whom took on some of the new servant elves or house elves. Lord Inverness led the families, but it was his brilliant lieutenants, Henri Poteur and Guy de Blackston (later shortened to Black), who made the victory possible. Cassia Fletcher brought the old ritual out of obscurity and provided the ideal solution to the situation, as useful servitude is far preferred to the outright slaughter of all the beasts....”

Henri Poteur... Could that be Henry Potter? Was his family line responsible for making that Dobby the crazy thing he was? Harry shook his head. Anything was possible.

Next time that crazy elf showed up, Harry would see if there was something he could do to make it less crazy. Would a free elf be rid of that pesky confinement ritual? Or would the changes only appear over several generations?

Who knew....

Harry finished the other relevant books over the next week, but he still didn’t have a clue as to how to deal with Dobby. Could he treat the beast like a leprechaun and trick it into giving away information? Blasted thing.

After that, Harry returned to the more interesting books. The Chamber of Secrets was one bit of interesting lore....

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Harry spent a few weeks searching the castle for unrecognizable magic. The entrance to the chamber was obviously protected somehow. Magical, of course, as the protection had held for a thousand years.

Harry got very good at casting the magical analysis charm. He kept seeing the same readings over and over again, too.

Finally he discovered a spot where his spell registered a very odd pattern of magic, unlike any normal magical response he'd seen in the castle. The girl's bathroom – the one with the creepy ghost in it all the time – had something else odd inside it.

He spent some time down and narrowed it down to an odd set of sinks. Harry hissed at the thing – given that Slytherin had built it – and saw the whole thing begin to move and open.

“Odd he’d pick a sink in a girl’s bathroom...particularly as there was no plumbing when Hogwarts was built.” Harry wondered if perhaps this entrance had been created over the original one in the more recent past.

Harry levitated himself down the hole. It was quite grimy, but there were signs someone had used it recently.

Harry picked his way quietly through the natural cavern leading away from the end of the tunnel. He came to the entrance a few minutes later. The massive steel door was open. Someone was inside. He’d forgotten his Invisibility Cloak, but he had finally learned the Disillusionment Charm. He made himself invisible and walked inside the massive room.

A puny firstie was on the ground staring into a book. The tail of a massive basilisk slithered out of view, into the mouth of the statue at the other end of the room.

“Sheba is still alive....” Harry noted the girl spoke with an older man’s voice. Something odd was happening. Parselmouths were rare, so how could a male-inflected slip of a girl be a Parselmouth?

“...the blood traitor knows little of the blood status of those children here. Granger is one for sure. There must be others. I must make sure she is more inquisitive in the future....”

That was enough for Harry. The girl was possessed it sounded like; she was speaking of herself as a separate entity.

Harry pulled out his wand and carefully took aim. It was a longer distance shot. “Stupefy.”

The girl didn’t even hear the whispered words. She collapsed on the stone ground. Harry walked over to her and the diary. He cast an analysis spell at the book. The results were unlike anything Harry had ever seen, but it was clearly the blackest of the black arts.

Harry wanted more information before he decided how to deal with the possessed girl. He set the diary far away from the girl and then drew a Silencing Line around him and girl. That bit of magic was a poor man’s silencing ward, very temporary but also very easy to cast.

Harry woke the girl. She blinked and opened her mouth a few times before asking, “Who are you?”

The voice was a girlish one.

“Do you know where you are?”

“No. What are you doing to me?”

“I’m not sure. I found you here, speaking like a young man. Is that one of your hobbies?”

“What?”

Harry shook his head. “That diary over there. Where did you get it?”

“I found it this summer.”

“Does it do anything unusual?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Tell me if you want to live.”

The girl squeaked. “The writing disappears. It talks back. Sometimes it shows me things....”

“How?”

“It shows me Hogwarts fifty years ago, my professors when they were younger....”

“Memories in a book. Did you know your hands are covered in blood and feathers?”

The girl looked down and noticed how filthy she was. “I don’t understand....”

Harry stunned her again. There wasn’t much she could tell him. She was obviously stupid to come under the control of such a vile object, but she had never done anything to Harry. He decided to do the safe, even the kind thing. He would take a year of her memories and leave her somewhere...with someone else to take the blame.

The diary would remain in this room until Harry could figure out what it was. He didn’t fancy himself trapped inside his own mind while some foreign force controlled his body.

Harry aimed his wand at the little girl’s forehead and said, “Obliviate.” He focused on exactly how much he wanted gone. It was a surprisingly flexible spell. (Harry had already practiced it a few times on Argus Filch, but he’d never taken a year of memories before from anyone.)

Harry spent twenty minutes examining the room before he levitated the red headed girl as he left. He had a plan to deal with this.

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Breakfast the next morning was an odd event. Half the teachers were missing. The Gryffindor table was in shock. The Slytherins were scheming to figure out what was happening.

Harry knew, of course.

Another useless teacher would be departing Hogwarts soon. Harry couldn't abide stupidity of any sort – nor bullies. Three Defense teachers had now been dispatched: Quirrel, Quirrel's replacement Mugoba (who spoke in a heavy French accent impenetrable to anyone in the room), and now Lockhart. The man had been found by ghosts a few hours ago after attempting to plant Ginny Weasley's unconscious body near the Slytherin dormitories. Harry knew that the prevailing theory would be that Lockhart practiced some sort of depravity upon the girl, obliterated her, and tried to leave her somewhere to implicate some or all of Slytherin House.

A perfect plan, save that Lockhart stumbled and bashed his head in on a staircase while he was fleeing the scene.

Weasley might be able to make up the lost knowledge – or, at worst, she'd have to start over next year. Lockhart would be lucky to escape a ten year confinement at Azkaban. It was the least he deserved. He was an obvious fraud...but Harry needed him alive and with a working wand to deny everything and make himself look even more guilty.

Harry waited until that evening before he returned to the third floor bathroom. This time a ghost was there singing to itself.

"I was looking for the Bloody Baron," Harry said. "Have you seen him?"

The ghost looked upset and then burst into tears. She flew right out of the room. All ghosts were terrified of the Bloody Baron, but Harry couldn't figure out why.

He opened the entry and levitated himself down. A few minutes later, Harry was puzzling over how to get the basilisk to come to him.

“Basilisk of the Chamber?”

That did nothing. Harry could continue trying or he could tempt that blasted diary. Neither seemed too appealing right now.

“Salazar Slytherin’s Basilisk!”

On the word Slytherin, the mouth of the statue began to open. Go figure. A megalomaniac made his own name the password in his secret chamber.

That was how Harry learned how to converse with a basilisk. It was skeptical at first when Harry told it he didn’t plan to use it to kill anyone. It then became indifferent when Harry said he was the last known Parselmouth in the country. Finally they worked out a truce.

“I won’t kill you,” the massive snake said. “You don’t try to kill me.”

“Agreed.”

Harry now had an interesting resource in his corner. He spent another twenty minutes chatting with the monster about how it fed (spiders from the forest or other animals it found) and how many people it had known since Salazar (four, including Harry, Tom Riddle, and Ginny Weasley; the snake did not know the name of the fourth).

“Sleep. I may return in time.”

“I do not care.”

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Harry began working on a circle of friends. He helped them with their studies, sought their opinions on a wide range of issues, and supported them in their activities and interests. By the time Harry was a third year, he had a Slytherin, three Ravenclaws, two Hufflepuffs, and a Gryffindor among his circle.

He had watched Slughorn and improved on the man's overbearing ways. Harry tried subtlety and found it worked for him.

A portion of the group was currently up to its eyes in books on animagi. Hermione Granger insisted that Harry help her in the library. Susan Bones and Justin Finch-Fletchley tagged along, as did Terry Boot. Harry usually only got to spend time with Ted Nott when other people weren't around. Harry understood.

"Are we done," Harry asked.

Hermione wanted to argue. No one else wanted to study animagi any longer. Seventeen books for a two foot essay – ridiculous.

"Great, who wants to help me research Dementors? I don't like being near the damned things...."

Terry and Hermione were game, but Susan and Justin bailed. Hufflepuffs were actually smarter in a lot of ways than Ravenclaws...what with common sense and all.

It was ten minutes before the library closed when Hermione found the book that described the Patronus Charm.

"I want to learn this," she declared.

Harry peered over her shoulder. "I do, too. That damned thing on the Hogwarts Express made me faint...and I don't like that."

Terry looked at the charm. "I don't know when I'd ever use it, but I'm game, too."

"We'll start tomorrow," Harry said.

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Harry was off for another hour of practicing his Patronus near to that blasted boggart they'd found in the dungeon. He'd have to swing by Gryffindor first to get Hermione. It wasn't exactly safe for Harry to practice his nascent spell casting against a Dementor-shaped boggart without someone else around.

He knocked on the Fat Lady's portrait and waited for someone to come out and help him. That someone was Ron Weasley and he was carrying a rather sad looking rat in his hand.

"Potter, what do you need?" His tone was bored.

"I'm supposed to study with Hermione Granger. Could you tell her I'm here?"

Ron nodded and pulled the portrait shut behind him. Harry kept thinking about that strange rat all the while he waited.

Hermione popped her head out the portrait and looked ready to practice.

"Hermione, could you ask Weasley to come back for a second? I had a question for him just now."

She shrugged and snorted. "I've no idea why, but sure."

A few moments later Weasley reappeared with his rat and an eyedropper in hand. "Yeah?"

"I was wondering about familiars, Weasley. How long have you been bonded...."

"He's my pet, not my familiar. He was Percy's before I got him, if you must know."

Harry nodded and pulled out his wand. He quickly cast the magical analysis spell – which reported back as 'wizard' – and then cast a stunner.

Weasley stood there like an oaf and Hermione prepared to start screaming.

Harry shook his head. "You haven't got a rat. You've got a wizard hiding out as a rat...."

"That's impossible," Ron said. "He's been in the family for, I don't know, twelve years."

"Longer than rats live, but not too long for an animagus."

Hermione shouted in surprise and joy. The girl belonged in Ravenclaw, no doubt.

"Let's take it to Professor Flitwick," Harry said. It really was a curiosity and probably a matter for law enforcement.

"McGonagall – or Dumbledore," Hermione said. She did have a fetish of some sort for those two former Gryffindors. Harry decided then that Hermione might be useful, but she could never be part of his grander plans, the ones that were still just barely conceived.

Ron nodded. "Dumbledore will know."

Harry levitated the rat in front of them as none of them really wanted to touch the foul looking thing. Ron had been attempting to give the pathetic looking creature some medicine Hagrid recommended, but the rat refused to allow the eyedropper anywhere near its mouth. The mange was taking out great clumps of the beast's fur.

Hermione seemed to know the way to the Headmaster's office and even had the password to the gargoyle.

"Miss Granger, Mister Potter, Mister Weasley..." the voice came through the door.

Harry pushed the door open and the levitated rat went in first.

“I think this rat isn’t a rat, Headmaster,” he said. Ron and Hermione just looked unsure standing behind him.

“Let’s get Professor Lupin and Professor McGonagall and see what we can do, then, right?”

The larger group was ready within a few minutes to see what this rat really was. McGonagall nodded to Lupin who cast the Animagus Reversal spell. Within a few moments, Lupin saw his old friend Peter Pettigrew stunned on the ground.

“My Merlin, Harry was right,” Ron said, looking as if he might be sick. “I’ve been sleeping with that...that man for three years.” Ron turned positively green.

“He was dead,” Lupin said with a flat tone.

“Not that dead, it seems,” Dumbledore whispered. “I wonder how to begin....”

“Sir,” Harry said, “who is he? Why do you and Professor Lupin seem to know him?”

McGonagall, the only one without a shocked look to her face, took the question. “He was Peter Pettigrew, a friend to your father when they were in school. During the war, it seemed like Sirius Black killed him...but that’s obviously not true, is it?”

Harry nodded. It seemed like more retarded wizards had made more assumptions. Now they didn’t know how to deal with the evil things they’d done through ignorance and stupidity. “Professor, may I call Professor Slughorn? He’s likely to have Veritaserum.”

Dumbledore nodded at Harry’s request. In ten minutes, the whole group had added another massive participant, as Slughorn wasn’t voluntarily going anywhere. He would be able to dine out on this story for months.

The interrogation was short and to the point. The man was Peter Pettigrew; he had killed the Muggles on the street in order to

disappear and frame his old friend; he had served as Secret Keeper to the Potters and betrayed their secret willingly to the Dark Lord. Dumbledore stunned the man once it was all over.

He put his head into his fireplace and called for Amelia Bones. "Madam, could I borrow you for a few minutes, along with a couple of your Aurors. We've had a very interesting piece of information come to light."

The process was repeated and a gobsmacked Bones took nearly five minutes to decide what to do. "Cornelius is an idiot about many things, so we'll do this the underhanded way. Albus, convene a session of the Wizengamot for this afternoon, a full session. I'll ensure we have a full contingent of reporters. Cornelius is currently on his way to Blackpool to attend a Ball with the Lithuanian Ambassador this evening, so he will receive his notice long after the session is over. I think I will ensure that Madam Umbridge never receives a notice nor shall a number of certain families...."

Harry marveled at the woman. She was slow to get started but had a thoughtful mind and a meticulous plan.

"What will happen to the fugitive Sirius Black?"

"If the trial goes the way I expect and receives the attention from the media, I think we can make it clear he's been cleared of all charges...."

Harry nodded. Dumbledore looked thoughtful. Lupin looked horrified. Harry would look into their reactions later.

"Why doesn't the school have animagus detection wards?" Harry asked after Bones left with her prisoner.

"We never thought we needed them before...." That was Dumbledore, still lost in thought.

The trial as Bones arranged it was short and to the point. Pettigrew spoke for almost thirty minutes covering every question the Elders

asked him. It was beyond clear that a serious miscarriage of justice had occurred.

The most disturbing part was where the rat described a ritual Voldemort had prepared before Pettigrew and the Dark Lord went to the Potters. One dead Muggle, a small vial of a potion, and Harry couldn't stop wondering at the point of it all.

"Guilty," was the verdict.

Dumbledore then raised the question of Sirius Black. Because of Bones' selection of the invitees there was no debate or question. The press recorded the first trial of Sirius Black – twelve years after his imprisonment – where he was declared innocent of the charges against him.

Further action by the Wizengamot included revoking Pettigrew's Order of Merlin and setting up a compensation fund for Sirius Black. Writs were issued for Cornelius Fudge, Bartemius Crouch, and Millicent Bagnold to answer questions before the Wizengamot regarding their roles in the affair. Specifically in their roles denying Sirius Black any sort of trial.

Harry enjoyed the exposure of incompetence...it was a capital crime in Harry's book. He pondered that when he returned to Hogwarts. What did he really believe in?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry met Sirius Black one month after Remus Lupin successfully tracked the man down and convinced him he was no longer being hunted. That the Dementors had been removed from Hogwarts was a strong proof of this.

Sirius was in a room at St. Mungo's. He had wounds that were still healing and looked a touch undernourished.

"Harry...."

"Mr. Black, it's nice to meet you."

“Call me Sirius. You look just like your dad did....”

Harry smiled and nodded.

“Mr. Lupin told me you are my godfather.”

“That I am, Harry, that I am.”

“What does a godfather do in the wizarding world?”

“Steps in for the parents if they’re unable.”

Harry nodded. “When I was an infant why did you leave me with the Dursleys while you went after Mr. Pettigrew? The Aurors surely could have done that better than just a single wizard.”

Sirius looked pitiful for a moment. “I was angry. You seemed safe with Hagrid so I thought I would avenge my best friend. It didn’t work out very well.”

“You were in Gryffindor, I take it.”

The gnarled wizard laughed a few times. “I guess my story sounds like the epitome of foolish bravery, doesn’t it?”

Harry smiled and nodded.

“I would like to get to know you, even have you live with me, if you’d like...once I get a place to live.”

“I’d like to know you better as well. Things at the Dursleys aren’t bad, but I will definitely keep your offer top of mind.”

Sirius smiled. “I am sorry, you know. I thought of James first and not you.”

Though Harry and Sirius didn’t know it, this was the last chance for Harry to turn away from the path he was already following. Sirius’ stories of his parents, no matter how charming and amusing, weren’t

enough. Harry didn't change. He was locked in his course and refused to be moved.

Sirius did leave Harry with one fantastic idea before the boy left. "You wouldn't happen to know where the Marauder's Map went, would you?"

Harry shook his head.

"It looks like a tatty piece of parchment, but it holds something wonderful inside it, a map of Hogwarts and everyone moving around inside it...."

Later that night, Harry threw himself into his new project, a new map.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The few weeks before the end of his third year at Hogwarts, Harry was busy surreptitiously copying dozens and dozens of the books in the library, many from the Restricted Section. He needed things to keep him busy and interested over the summer months.

Over the summer, he spent hours in the park and in his room reading. He was finally getting ready, ready to announce who and what he was. He was not a blood purist like Malfoy and Voldemort and the other knuckledraggers. He was not a willfully blind mugglelover like Dumbledore. He didn't believe in rule by cronies like Fudge and others in the Ministry. He believed only in merit – the rule of the talented, enforced by their power.

Harry had set up a small laboratory in his room so that he could turn iron and lead found at nearby construction sites into gold. He finally had a need for easy gold so he was using the Philosopher's Stone he'd stolen in his first year.

His plans were stretching outside of Hogwarts for the first time. It wasn't enough to dispose of bad teachers and to destroy those who would harm him. He needed allies and sources of information. He needed a wider reach. He needed competence writ large in the world.

Seeing the injustice done to his godfather had turned Harry's attention to the wider wizarding world for the first time. It was time to begin reshaping the world. Harry didn't think he wanted to rule – he didn't have the patience for it – but he wanted to set the rules and choose the least terrible leaders.

He needed to cleanse the world of incompetence wherever it existed, with whatever means he could find. He would use information; he would use gold; he would snuff out lives when required. He would make a world worth living in – and no one would ever know why it changed.

Harry wanted results, not credit.

Harry made gold (with his Philosopher's Stone), read every book he'd copied from Hogwarts, and snuck out to Diagon Alley to deposit his gold and purchase a larger and more secure trunk for his most precious possessions, his books.

There was a reason Harry was in Ravenclaw.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry spent the calm of his first two months at Hogwarts copying nearly book of interest in the Hogwarts library. His special book trunk had five room-sized compartments which were almost bursting when Harry finished. He didn't bother with obviously obsolete volumes or with areas of study that didn't interest him. Divination books remained untouched as did anything wizards published on Muggles.

Harry had one full room devoted to Charms of every shape and variety. Kitchen charms; cleaning charms; task charms for the farmer or the builder or the innkeeper or the broom maker or the Auror; charms for translation or learning languages; joke or pranking charms of every shape and variety. Harry had memorized just over five hundred of the more useful – or obscure – of these charms.

Another room held his texts on transfiguration, arithmancy, and spell modification. He was in here often. Hogwarts didn't teach spell

modification, but Harry wanted to learn it. He wanted to have spells no one else knew or could combat.

He had a room for books on runes, rituals, and astronomy. His fourth room held the most important thirty potions manuals and books related to history, defense, and magical creatures.

The fifth and final room held the volumes on offensive magics and wards. The books filled less than a single bookcase so far, but Harry knew that this room would be very important. Harry had memorized every spell in this room, even if he planned never to use some of them.

It was odd how few books there were in Hogwarts on offensive magics and wards – and none at all on alchemy – even though the school possessed an impressive set of wards and its Headmaster had studied under Nicholas Flamel. There were more books at Hogwarts, just not available to the students. Harry just needed to find them.

Harry was stuck at dinner the night before Halloween when he wished he could be in his room in Ravenclaw Tower reading. He was back onto the problem of Dementors. He'd mastered the Patronus Charm, but it was barely enough to chase the soul demons away. He wanted something a bit sturdier to use when dealing with them.

He surveyed the room and thought about the theme of international magical cooperation. Harry could use more friends as spokes in his intelligence network. He'd have to see if he had enough charm for Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, wouldn't he?

“Welcome, young witches and wizards. Tonight we welcome our foreign counterparts as we begin the TriWizard Tournament again. The glory and majesty of victory. The danger and suspense of the challenges. What a year we'll have. Three champions; three next-to-impossible challenges; one TriWizard Cup Winner. Madame Maxime and Professor Karkaroff will join me as judges, along with the Head of Games and Sports, Ludo Bagman, and Interim Head of International Magical Cooperation, Toperrany Flint.” Dumbledore summoned forth an old casket, complete with dust and cobwebs. “This Goblet of Fire

will select the champions from the three schools. Students have until dinner tomorrow night to enter their names. To ensure the safety of the participants, only those seventeen or older as of tomorrow may enter. I will draw the Age Line myself....”

Harry frowned. This sounded like fun, but it was likely more trouble brewing, like that stone in first year. Harry decided on a bit of vigilance over night to be sure nothing odd happened with the goblet.

When he returned to the Ravenclaw Tower he dug out an interesting historical volume on games and sports. The TriWizard Tournament had a chapter inside it. His reading unsettled Harry. The competition was known for being rife with cheating and intentional maiming of the other’s schools’ pupils. It sounded like a potential disaster waiting to happen.

Harry used his Invisibility Cloak to return downstairs before the last of the people left the Great Hall. He watched Viktor Krum enter his name while his goatish Headmaster lurked behind him.

He sat up the rest of the night observing. A few more people came in when the hall was empty to put their names in, shy people. Nothing unusual happened at all.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry had caught a quick nap instead of attending History of Magic. It wasn’t like Binns missed him.

When he got to dinner that evening, he felt the tension in the room. So many wanted to see their names come out of the goblet...Harry just wanted to be sure nothing strange happened.

He clutched his wand under the table after he finished eating. The goblet began its pyrotechnic show. Soon Viktor Krum, Fleur Delacour, and Cedric Diggory from Hufflepuff were champions. The blasted goblet began sparking a fourth time and another paper flew out.

Harry cast the spell he hoped he wouldn’t have to use. Whatever was on the paper was magically switched with one of the bits of paper still

inside the Goblet. The transition was seamless, Harry barely even noticed it.

How did a fourth name get queued up? Did Dumbledore do it...or did someone inside the Ministry, where Harry assumed the Goblet came from, intend to put a fourth name into play.

Harry was modest enough to presume that the fourth name could have been anyone's, but paranoid enough to know it had been his own.

Dumbledore caught the slip of paper and read out the name: "Evangeline Slovyenko, Durmstrang."

Dumbledore seemed genuinely surprised at the fourth name, so perhaps he wasn't the guilty one. He also hadn't tried to pronounce Harry's name when it was obviously someone else's name coming from the goblet.

So...who had done this thing?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"I cannot believe the nerve of those dark wizards," seemed to sum up the view of the Beauxbatons students.

Harry spent a few minutes after the feast chatting with some of them. He was looking for an ounce or two of intelligence...and found more fluff than fortitude inside the ones he spoke with.

Later he moved onto some of the still-shocked Durmstrang students who had two champions to deal with...and ex-lovers at that.

Harry's response to the glares from Durmstrang. "I completely believe your second champion didn't engineer this." Of course, Harry did not mention his own minor role...as he was still trying to find the person who had made a fourth name pop out of the goblet.

Harry eyed up the usual suspects. Bagman (acquitted Death Eater), Flint (suspected Death Eater), Karkaroff (pardoned Death Eater)... Where to start?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry was frustrated beyond belief. The Goblet of Fire mystery was still unsolved and he'd run through his candidates. He'd used powerful wandless compulsions on each of his three suspects. None of them knew who engineered the fourth name.

He sat in Potions class with the Slytherins and tried to avoid Slughorn's repeated glances his way. The man was trying to get him to come to some sort of meeting in his office in two days time. It sounded sketchy to Harry.

As Harry tried to make his way out of class, Slughorn tried to corner Harry again. Harry cast a compulsion to tell the truth.

“What’s the meeting about?”

“I’d like to introduce you to Rita Skeeter....”

“The reporter who lies about everyone?”

“Well, yes, my boy.”

“Thanks for being upfront. I’ll consider it.”

“Excellent, my boy. I’ll let her know you’re coming.”

Harry didn’t argue with or correct the old man. Slughorn had just outlived his usefulness, hadn’t he?

Harry walked into Ravenclaw and listened to a seventh year complaining about the interview process at the Ministry of Magic. “I’m going to be a fourth tier office clerk for a decade in Games and Sports before I even get looked at for a promotion and a raise.”

“How do you know that,” Harry asked.

“I’m a halfblood. If I were Muggleborn, I wouldn’t have even gotten an interview....”

“Really?”

“Purebloods can join the better departments. Some even get snagged to be the assistants to department heads. That Weasley boy who graduated last year was slotted to work for the head of International Magical Cooperation before Crouch got demoted. He’s about as worthless as wizards come, but he’s got wizarding blood going back at least seven hundred years if not longer.”

Harry frowned, but nodded his understanding.

“Purebloods who hate each other will still normally look out for each other. If someone other than a pureblood had sent away another pureblood to Azkaban without a trial, they’d have been Kissed. As it was, Crouch got a slap on the wrist.”

“I didn’t realize,” Harry said.

Kent Lovage just shrugged. “I was prepared. But no one ever tells the Muggleborn not to come to Hogwarts...none of the teachers ever talk about the discrimination.”

Harry sighed. “We’ll just have to see if there’s anything to be done, Kent. Thanks for mentioning it.”

“If you ever need to start up a Quidditch team, I’ll have all the forms you need to fill out....”

The boy was already bitter long before he started in his new job. It made Harry curious. Stupid people could be men or women, rich or poor, pureblooded or muggle – why did the pureblood supremacy movement have a lock on the political culture? And how was Harry going to reverse it?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Slughorn had cornered Harry five times in the last two months, each time demanding that Harry meet with Rita Skeeter, “a dear old friend of mine.”

Mad-Eye Moody kept his odd, creepy magical eye trained on Harry nearly every moment Harry was anywhere near the ancient ex-Auror.

Dumbledore kept on inviting Harry to tea to discuss his education...but never really said anything.

Harry was done with meddlesome old men. Done!

When June rolled around, Harry was ready for his final plan of the school year. On the morning of the Third Task of the TriWizard Tournament, Alastor Moody was found dead of poison so strong the bezoar in his stomach and the other one in his mouth couldn’t save him. The obvious retaliatory strike back against Slughorn had left the man without a right arm or any blood in his body.

Their obvious mutual antipathy for each other had caused Slughorn to poison Moody – and the suspicious ex-Auror to maim Slughorn and thereby avenge his own murder.

God, wizards would believe anything. It hadn’t been the best of Harry’s plots, but the people bought it without question.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Krum won. He went into the maze in second place overall and managed to cheat his way to victory.

(Even with the tragedy in Hogwarts, nothing changed with the TriWizard Tournament. Dumbledore told the Ministry about the tragedy, but everyone agreed to keep mum until after the tournament concluded.)

After he emerged with the Cup, the world discovered how Krum did it. The accidental fourth champion was found stunned. Cedric Diggory had had his wand snapped and was in a temporary coma. Fleur

Delacour had been banished into a pool of sticky sap that had been part of the course.

The judges forced Krum to compensate Diggory for his destroyed wand. Rita Skeeter went wild with every kind of accusation of Dark Arts being used in the Tournament. Everyone left, even before the deaths of Slughorn and Moody were announced, with a bad taste in their mouths over the affair.

The final act to the TriWizard debacle came the following day, after news of Moody and Slughorn broke, when the Board of Governors sacked Albus Dumbledore as Headmaster. He'd had four teachers die in the last few years, two of them killing each other, one teacher molest and oblivate a year's worth of memories from a student, and he'd hired a werewolf.

Harry was glad for the outcome, but still didn't know who had mucked around with the Goblet of Fire. Harry decided to try confronting his original suspect, now that the man was out of office.

Harry found Dumbledore the day before term ended levitating some boxes on his walk to the outer gate.

“Can I help you, Headmaster?”

“No, thank you, Mr. Potter. I’m just moving some boxes and my magic is strong enough.”

“I was wondering if you ever discovered who caused the Goblet to spit out four names, sir?” Harry used a mild touch of his compulsion ability to see what he could shake loose out of the old warlock.

“Why, yes, I’ve known all along, my boy.”

“Who was it?”

“Me, of course.” Dumbledore looked shocked to have admitted that, but he couldn’t retract it, could he?

“Why, sir?” Harry could have kicked himself for not returning to Dumbledore as a suspect sooner.

“I had hoped the Goblet would select you, so that the whole school could see what you were made of. You obviously know a lot more than you show....”

Harry nodded and pondered over how to repay Dumbledore for the attempted favor.

“The only thing I never figured out is how that other name came out. I was so shocked to see it that I just read it out. Had I kept my wits about me, I could have said your name.”

“But if that girl was the one the Goblet selected, wouldn’t she have been compelled to compete?”

“Tosh and nonsense. The line about the magical binding contract just sounds good and keeps the kids from getting nervous and trying to back out. Magical contracts have to be initiated in blood or magic, you know, things far more substantial than a mere slip of paper.”

Harry nodded. He decided to see what Hogwarts had in the way of legal magic – the power of binding contracts and such, there could be something there.

“What did you slip to me to get me to tell you all that?”

“It’s a gift I have, Headmaster. People like to tell me things, you know.”

Harry was quiet for a few minutes before he asked his next question. “Why me?”

“I wished to flush out Voldemort, offer him a temptation. I’ve been trying to discover for years if he’s still around in some form or other....”

“You would have sacrificed my life for some information?”

Albus shrugged and was ready to reply before his face went slack. A second, more powerful compulsion made him forget about this conversation. The compulsion would last until broken, but it wasn't like people got checked for that sort of thing.

"I wish you the best, Headmaster."

"You, too, young Harry. Best of luck. I fear you may need it."

That ending to the conversation left Harry wondering. Dumbledore knew – or suspected something. Did he know of Harry's plans? Harry didn't speak of them with anyone and his mind was quite well protected with his ability to occlude others from it.

Harry decided more research into Dumbledore might be in the cards.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Rita Skeeter finally got her interview. She used Slughorn's promises before his death to directly contact Harry for a meeting. This one Harry was glad to give. He had enough notice to plot out exactly what he wanted to say and what effects he wanted to achieve with his words.

The article on the front of the Daily Prophet the day Harry left on the Hogwarts Express said the following:

Boy-Who-Lived Faults Dumbledore, Fudge, Ministry for Falling Hogwarts Standards; Calls Fudge Corrupt

In a rare public interview, Harry Potter commented on Albus Dumbledore's recent dismissal from Hogwarts. "I liked the man for his humor and for the positive things he brought to the school. However, I have been aghast at some of the choices he made in hiring faculty and staff at Hogwarts. Two of his appointees got themselves killed trying to steal a precious artifact; another one should have been imprisoned in Azkaban rather than hired to teach young witches and wizards; and two others hated each other so much that they killed each other. On the academic side, I've found the instruction very

uneven here as several of my courses are excellent while a number of courses are quite below par."

When asked to elaborate on who does a good job, Mr. Potter smiled and said, "I have enjoyed learning from Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, Vector, and the late Professor Slughorn. Astronomy has never been an interest of mine, but Professor Sinistra has done her best to intrigue me and the others in the classes. One of my Defense teachers was quite good, Mr. Lupin, while Mr. Moody was rather more intimidating than helpful. On the improvement side, I am quite appalled at the quality of instruction provided on the History of Magic, which should be taught by a living witch or wizard, and Ancient Runes, which is too much a historical class, and the lack of materials provided in the library or in classes on wards, offensive magic, dueling, politics, alchemy, enchanting, magical finance, or a few dozen other fields." Mr. Potter proves here why he was placed in Ravenclaw House.

I asked Mr. Potter why the situation had become so bad. "I think Mr. Dumbledore didn't think things were bad. He didn't know or care to know that the standards had fallen – which is unfortunate proof that he shouldn't have been Headmaster as long as he was. From what I can tell in the library, he hadn't approved expenditures for purchasing new library volumes in at least ten years. Magic does change and evolve over time. Witches and wizards discover new ways of doing things or rediscover ideas that were previously lost – and we do not have the most recent knowledge available to us as students at Hogwarts. If Madame Maxime at Beauxbatons had done such a thing to her students, she would have been immediately sacked...but Dumbledore has always been treated differently, hasn't he?"

"As for the people who were supposed to be watching Dumbledore, the Board of Governors fights about minor issues and ignores the bigger ones. For example, in my second year, I remember hearing about the board locked in a bitter dispute for months over Mr. Lucius Malfoy's contribution of new brooms specifically to Slytherin House. Instead of debating such a useless matter, they could have appropriated funds and bought the other three houses new brooms as well – problem solved.

“As well, the Ministry of Magic does little more than write OWL and NEWT examinations. They grant blanket teaching certifications to anyone Hogwarts hires without checking them out first. Cornelius Fudge – and Millicent Bagnold before him – abdicated the Ministry’s limited role in ensuring a quality education for every British witch and wizard. To my mind, anyone who believes they have more important tasks than providing the best education possible doesn’t belong in education or government.”

I followed up by asking Mr. Potter his personal opinion of Minister Fudge. “I have only met him once, but I did look into his record as a student, a Ministry official, and then as Minister of Magic. His record as a student – barely passing four NEWTs – has borne out in his Ministry career. His four years in office have provided a record that shows him to be, perhaps, the worst Minister we’ve had in 232 years...since Reginald Flotibot was publicly forced out as Minister after several corruption scandals broke....”

I asked here whether Mr. Potter suspected that Fudge was guilty of corruption. “I have no evidence other than common sense. His closest associates come from older, broke pureblood families with little to recommend them other than their pureblood status. His ‘advisors,’ those lobbyists who fill his mind with ideas, are all wealthy purebloods. In the four years he’s been in office his personal coffers have filled quite handily – he even spoke about it in an interview last year in Political Monthly magazine – and the Umbridge family finally accumulated enough wealth to cancel out their long-standing debts. I understand that Undersecretary Dolores Umbridge managed to buy a seat on the Wizengamot earlier this year. If they accomplished all of those things on their governmental salaries, then I’ll be most impressed.”

I closed the interview by asking Mr. Potter why he’d been so verbose in this interview when he’d refused to speak with the press before. “Ms. Skeeter, I’ve seen what charming things you can write when the fancy strikes you. I only agreed to this interview after you swore an Unbreakable Vow to report my words exactly as I spoke them. The truth means a lot to me and this is the first opportunity I’ve had to ensure I was quoted accurately.”

We shall expect to see more bombs from Mr. Potter's mouth in the coming years I expect.

Harry smiled happily at the article. It was exactly what he'd wanted. He came off as the quintessential Ravenclaw looking out only for the accumulation of knowledge...and his accusations against Malfoy, Fudge, Umbridge, and the Ministry would sting them into stupid reactions.

Oh, Harry loved dumb opponents. They had no idea what they were going up against.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry hadn't known how the attacks would escalate off the printed page, but he wasn't terribly surprised when he felt the oppressing sadness enveloping him and Dudley. Dementors – the Ministry was trying to kill him. Harry smiled, pulled out his wand, and began casting a ward he'd discovered in a ragged book in the restricted section: the Patronus Line.

He cast a box-like ward that trapped the two demi-demons inside it. Dudley had long since passed out.

Harry was interested to see if anyone would detect and call him on his use of Underage Magic. As he'd constructed a ward – which was exempted from the law because of various loopholes purebloods had insisted upon – Harry didn't expect anything to happen to him.

He waited an hour while the Dementors shrieked and keened. They did not enjoy their temporary prison very much. It was like a powerful Patronus Charm pushing at them from every direction. They couldn't flee, just like an underage wizard wouldn't be able to pass over a well-cast Age Line. The Patronus Line was a wonderful bit of magic....

“What to do with you?”

The Dementors looked at their captor.

“Can you understand me?”

One of them nodded slowly.

"I want you to return to the one who sent you. I want you to Kiss him or her – and every witch or wizard nearby. Do you understand?"

The faceless beast seemed to quiver in excitement. Harry took that as a yes. "If you betray me, I will imprison you and forget about you."

Then he cancelled the Patronus Line and watched the Dementors float away.

He figured Fudge had ordered one of his flunkies to do such a thing. Politicians often liked to use assassination to solve problems. Harry could return the favor, couldn't he?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The news of the attack of Dementors upon nine purebloods at a party in Devonshire brought down the Fudge government in three days. No one believed Cornelius had control of the beasts any longer.

He was ousted, four of his supporters in the Wizengamot were dead (Kissed), including his Undersecretary, and the tribunal immediately launched probes into corruption and incompetence by the administration. Fudge was ordered to wait for the results in Azkaban.

Amelia Bones managed to win the slot of Interim Minister.

Harry wrote a brief letter explaining that a properly cast Patronus Line as part of a mansion's ward structure would ensure the beasts stayed out. Dozens of witches and wizards sent him letters of thanks.

Harry laughed long into the night.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Fudge was convicted of accepting bribes and gross corruption the day before Harry's birthday and sent through the Veil the next day. All the lifers in Azkaban had been cleared out; all through the Veil. The

Dementors were being captured and put into Patronus Lined caverns underground.

A little bit of fear was a good thing, wasn't it?

The only thing that hadn't happened yet was that Lucius Malfoy had yet to make his vengeance known. Harry hadn't seen anything about the man in quite some time, nor had his name come out in the investigation into Fudge. Malfoy must be approaching broke with all the bribes he had to pay to keep out of a bribery investigation.

Damned purebloods.

The second of August Lucius made his plans clear. The third page of the Prophet explained, "Malfoy Gives Hundred Thousand Galleons to Hogwarts, Chairs Board of Governors; Vows to Increase Standards."

Harry smiled. Lucius Malfoy might be the best opponent Harry had gone up against in quite some time. He was smart and not afraid to bankrupt himself to achieve his goals.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry arrived for his OWL year at Hogwarts completely energized. Dudley had been afraid to look in Harry's direction following their brush with the Dementors. Petunia had been even more terrified in Harry's presence once the boy explained with barely a breath how he'd foiled an assassination plot against him.

Then the people on the train had seemed impressed by what seemed to be Harry's credo: competence. More than one pureblood commended Harry on his Skeeter interview and the letter to the Prophet over the summer. Half bloods and muggleborns seemed curious about Harry and what he meant exactly. Harry had spent a long period of time unraveling things that no one ever explained to those who most needed to know them.

He won himself a lot of converts to his basic cause before he even left the train. Plus he'd had a few letters back and forth to some of the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang crowd from last year.

Even better, Headmistress McGonagall announced new teachers for Defense, History of Magic, Transfiguration, and Ancient Runes at the Welcoming Feast. Harry had never heard of any of them before, but then again the Hogwarts library hadn't stocked current books in a decade. It was possible any one of these people was now quite famous.

Harry decided on a new item for his Christmas agenda: hitting the nontraditional bookstores in Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley. He needed more than what the school could provide and had exhausted the few books on offense and warding he'd acquired at Flourish and Blotts.

The Headmistress announced one last thing that evening. "As many of you may know, a generous benefactor provided Hogwarts with a sizable amount of money to help refurbish and increase the library collection. As you will see, we were busy over the summer. I hope you like the first phase of the plan. Madam Pince will be happy to answer any of your questions."

Harry smiled. The Malfoy money had gone toward books...excellent.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry immediately found it odd when Albus Dumbledore was strolling around Hogsmeade on the one weekend in October when Hogwarts students would be there. Even stranger, Albus actively sought out Harry for a conversation.

"I'm surprised, sir, I did say some terrible things about you in the newspaper."

"No less than I deserved. Paperwork never was my thing and I completely forgot about new books for the library."

Harry doubted that very much.

"How may I help you?"

“I just wanted to ask a question. Are you happy, Mr. Potter?”

“As happy as I could be growing up how and where I did.”

A stab of pain lanced through Dumbledore’s face. “I know you placed me there. I think it was a bad choice, myself. Vernon was a terror before he died....”

“How did he die?”

Harry felt the legilimency start before Harry answered. “Aunt Petunia said he was driving to a sales meeting and swerved into a concrete divider.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I’ve never driven a car, but I am sure it is quite complex.”

“I would ask you not to try legilimency again. I would hate to see you in prison for inappropriate conduct with a minor, sir.”

Albus flushed a bit. He thought himself too much a master to be caught.

“You learned the Mind Arts?”

“Fascinating,” Harry said, nodding. “Occlumency helps with information recall. I can keep hundreds of spells in mind when I’m doing a mock duel....”

“Perhaps one day I shall see your skill with a wand in battle....”

“Had you truly desired your students to be proficient with wands and magic, you yourself would have led a dueling club, sir. You didn’t care then...and I have no idea whether you do now.”

“I see,” Dumbledore said.

“Would you care to really tell me why you sought me out? I’m sure it didn’t have anything to do with my happiness.”

“I wondered if you’d ever heard of the Headmaster’s Collection?”

“Another library?”

Dumbledore nodded. “Some very rare books; other books restricted for the teachers alone to access.”

Harry nodded. “I suppose you shunted off everything on wards and offensive magic there?”

Dumbledore smiled. “Of course.”

“You are a bastard, Dumbledore. I hope retirement disagrees with you.”

“It does.”

“I finally thought about why you kept having Professor Flitwick suggest I take Divination. Your fraud of a Seer came across me in a seventh floor hallway and went into a trance. I suppose you kept me tucked away on Privet Drive until you needed me to ‘vanquish’ someone for you?”

Albus went very pale.

“You didn’t think she could speak the words again? They weren’t necessarily for your ears in the first place.... She only spoke them to you because you and the spy were listening in....”

“How do you know that?”

“I know a lot more than you expect, sir. Have a nice day. I hope you won’t have to loiter around Hogsmeade the next time you want to drop hints.”

The utterly confused Dumbledore walked slowly away from the scene of their quiet confrontation.

Harry wandered off to see if the used bookstore in town had anything worth knowing. He managed to find only three volumes of interest. A

book on defensive runic warding (the strongest and longest lasting sort), on the use of transfiguration and conjuration in dueling, and a third treatise on the nature of wands and how to customize them.

Harry, of course, continued to use a piece of wood, rather than a wand, but he did want to understand the theories behind wands better...if only to be able to thwart them the easier.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry, like all other fifth, sixth, and seventh years in Ravenclaw, got his own room to ensure excellent results on OWLs and NEWTs. He used the privacy to its utmost.

He peered out the window and saw the Slytherins practicing Quidditch. Harry used his wandless abilities – which had grown stronger than any of his contemporaries' wanded magic – to snap off several twigs in Draco Malfoy's broom. He liked the plan he was working on now.

Lucius would of course hate it, once he saw the results.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The first game of the Quidditch season was between Gryffindor and Slytherin. Slytherin lost when Dennis Creevey, a tiny young wizard, caught the snitch before Draco Malfoy did.

Harry watched the game from Ravenclaw Tower. Just when Draco was over four of his fellow team members, nine critical bristles from his broom cracked and fell away.

Draco plummeted to the ground and landed on top of the team's Keeper, one Chaser, and the two reserve Beaters.

Judging by how Draco fell, the pureblood would never ride a broom again, but he might perhaps one day relearn to walk.

Lucius screamed in panic and the blonde woman next to Harry's opponent burst into tears and began to run to the field. The three of

them on the field, plus the school's healer and other teachers trying to help, made for a compelling scene.

Harry had just begun a war Lucius didn't know he would lose. Harry cared about little. Malfoy, however, cared about his family and especially the good reputation of his family. Harry could attack purebloods for eons by attacking at their weaker points: their children, their wives, their good names, their wealth, their supposedly important family history.

Malfoy might still do something interesting, but it was relatively simple to defeat an opponent once one understood their weaknesses.

Lucius attacked through proxies – like his money or his political influence – so Harry wouldn't yet attack Lucius directly or permanently. But...if Lucius changed the rules, so would Harry.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The new Minister of Magic came to Hogwarts to see what was going on (she certainly didn't want to be accused of having her head in the sand, like Fudge did). Two interesting faces were in the group accompanying the Minister, the semi-disgraced head of medical administration, Bartemius Crouch, and his assistant who he called Weatherby.

Harry had picked up an interesting mental technique from a book he'd owl ordered from one of the used bookstores in Knockturn Alley: passive scanning. It was something akin to legilimency, but less aggressive and far harder to detect. Instead of one getting to pick what one saw, one took a look into the things another was most concerned about in the moment.

Bones passed the scan – she had no thoughts floating around of her taking bribes or anything else illegal. Several others passed...until Harry arrived on Crouch. The man was thinking about the Imperius Curse – about needing to recast it on his son, a son who supposedly died in Azkaban.

Interesting.

Everyone else passed until Harry got to the one called Weatherby, the former Head Boy from Gryffindor. He was one twisted puppy upstairs. He had a penchant for abducting muggle women and ensuring they remembered nothing afterwards. The boy clearly had inadequacy issues.

Harry kept from retching at some of the things he'd seen in Weasley's head and watched the group move through their investigation. One person had been released from the hospital immediately. Draco and three others were still in hospital, all of them with severe spine damage.

Bones pushed forward to the front of the group to look at the broom Draco had been riding. "My Merlin, I haven't been on a broom since I got bumped into management, but this thing is a mess. Bristles every which way. I can see forty or fifty that look like they want to break. This is a relatively new broom, should last twenty years. Has the child even maintained it once – or replaced any bristles?"

The Ministry's broom experts stepped forward and confirmed Bones' opinion. The broom was obviously in a state of terrible repair.

The whole thing was a terrible accident as the result of inept maintenance of a broom.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry paid Malfoy and the other three a visit in the infirmary a day later. He chatted with each of them. He took a bit longer with Malfoy than the others. He wormed his way through the boy's rather transparent mind and found a wealth of interesting material, much of it incriminating to the Malfoy family.

"Heal up, Malfoy, I need a good challenge for the best grade in Potions, you know...."

"You wish, Potter. I'm twice the brewer you are." Draco recognized a friendly taunt when he heard it.

“Get your carcass back in class and prove yourself.” Harry smiled and left. Too bad the young Malfoy was a moron. He couldn’t recognize a true threat when he saw it.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Bones was back a week after the initial investigation. She enjoyed lunch in the Great Hall. Harry stared at the woman and wondered how he could use her in discrediting Malfoy. The information Harry had discovered from Draco Malfoy revealed his father to be much worse than Harry had suspected.

That diary in Harry’s second year had originated with Malfoy. Malfoy had led the attacks at the Quidditch World Cup almost two years earlier. Malfoy wasn’t evil in a repenting sort of way; he was still doing things to seek out his fallen leader. Malfoy had to go.

An anonymous letter?

A whisper campaign?

A tipster walking into the Ministry?

Malfoy Manor burning down and his cache of Dark artifacts getting found afterwards?

Or...perhaps it was best that Malfoy brought himself down without any help from Bones.

Harry smiled and returned to his potatoes.

Malfoy came to Hogwarts often with his son still in the infirmary. A touch of compulsion and Harry would just see what could happen.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Lucius Malfoy had had a terrible day. His heir was still hospitalized and was still unable to walk. Narcissa had been confirmed as being unable to bear more children. The Malfoy line would have a damaged head after Lucius died.

Such a disgrace had never before occurred. The power of the Malfoy line was broken – because of a poorly maintained broom. Draco knew better than that. Lucius would remind the boy with a few painful curses just how important seemingly minor details were.

But when he returned at lunch time to inform Draco he was being moved to more competent Healers at St. Mungo's, Lucius felt the sudden, blinding fear that Aurors were about to raid the Manor. He needed to clear out the secret cache and dispose of everything...now.

He stalked out of Hogwarts and apparated back home. He summoned a featherlight satchel and undid the series of wards protecting a section of his drawing room floor. He went down the stone steps into the room and began summoning each item. (He knew better than to touch them with his own hands.) A full hour later, Lucius' magic was exhausted and the bag full.

He laid down in a chair and took a brief nap. When the twilight crept through the window, Lucius reawoke and apparated with the bag to Knockturn Alley. Lucius walked into Borgin & Burkes and saw an odd man behind the counter.

“May I help you?” the man asked.

“I would speak with your boss.”

“You mean my cousin? He’s in St. Mungo’s after an accident. I am minding the store for a week.”

“I guess I will return in a week.”

“Fair enough, good sir. May I tell him who called for him?”

“Lucius Malfoy.”

“I do have a letter for you, Mr. Malfoy, if you’ll give me a moment.”

Lucius wavered for a moment. He didn't want to be here, not with this stranger in a position of power. Old Burke was part of the old crowd, but who knew about this other decrepit looking man.

Malfoy accepted and read the letter. "Trust my cousin Treadwell as you would me, My friend Lucius." The handwriting was correct. The message was correct. Even the orange ink was correct for a message like this.

"Mister...."

"Burke, like my cousin."

"Mister Burke, I would like to place this bag in a room Burke created for me. Do you know how to access it?"

"He left me a note. He wanted you to access the space yourself, rather than letting another in on the secret."

Lucius nodded. That much, at least, was a sound idea.

Lucius walked past the odd caretaker of the store. He went to one section of the wall and tapped away at some gray, rotting boards. It was a long, specific sequence. Two dozen taps later, the stairs appeared leading to the basement. Lucius leapt on them and made his way down. The stairs would not last for long, not with the password old Burke had given Lucius.

Lucius moved quickly through the cramped basement. A barely visible path through all the stacks of books and boxes of banned objects allowed Lucius to pass toward his secret spot in the basement, the place where he hid the items he wasn't quite ready to part with.

Burke allowed him this little area as he knew that sooner or later Lucius would sell those items to him. A few of them Burke already had sold just as soon as he got his hands on them.

Lucius arrived at the cracked spot of foundation that marked his hiding place. He began casting the seven spells that would create an

opening for Lucius to access the secure space. Even though he was alone, Lucius used only nonverbal spells as he opened the space.

He laid the bag in the hidden room, along with a few other artifacts Lucius hadn't yet sold, and resealed the space. It took him ten more minutes to retrace his steps before he emerged out his basement.

As he hit the top step, he felt the stunner impact into his body. Lucius collapsed against the stairwell. He remained there when the passage resealed itself, cutting Lucius in half. The Aurors waiting for Malfoy hadn't expected that and didn't know how to efficiently get the passageway reopened.

Malfoy died seconds later of massive blood loss.

Amelia Bones came to the scene less than an hour later. This...this was monstrous. Amelia had ordered an operation on Borgin & Burke's to clean up the Dark Arts trade out of Knockturn. She hadn't wanted anyone to die.

Damn, it had to be Malfoy, too. The evidence was in the basement below, but luckily they had the entire room saturated in listening charms and scrying permissions.

"We're not going to get anything else out of this operation now that Malfoy's dead. Roll up everyone implicated. Bring in the Ministry cursebreakers and recover the evidence."

In a few weeks, Amelia would be presiding over forty three sets of trials related to the possession and sale of Dark Arts paraphernalia. And an inquest into one death. Why did Auror Tonks have to stun Malfoy? Why did that staircase have to seal itself up so quickly?

Amelia supervised the crime scene. This was quite a few levels below the things she should be doing as Minister, but her background in law enforcement drove her to be curious...and to be sure that things started going the right way for once.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry had pushed forward with his plans even after Malfoy died. He'd wanted the man in prison for a few years, not killed...worthy adversaries should be given second chances, after all.

Harry let Terribeth plan their annual pranks on the entire school. This time, instead of just the fun, Harry had a good reason for the prank. He needed time to break into the Headmistress' office and copy the Headmaster's Collection.

This time Terribeth the House Elf doused the green beans with the mildest prank; the potatoes with the Ever-Changing Pastille; and the meat pasties with the Virulent Vomiting Vinaigrette. Harry had spent a good deal of time examining the Weasley twins' failures and salvaged these three concepts for a very special prank.

Harry sat down to dinner and immediately helped himself to the green beans and a few of the other dishes that hadn't been spiked. He ate a few beans just as he saw others beginning to show signs of their problems. Time delayed powders are everything in the pranking business.

Harry began to sing loudly one moment and then reciting poetry the next. As very few children ate vegetables and most ate potatoes, most everyone in the room was either puking or finding that their arms changed into tentacles one moment, feathered wings the next, and then became enlarged candy canes after that.

The Headmistress couldn't stand up to give instructions to anyone as the meat pasties were among her favorite dishes. The school nurse was vomiting and had a table leg instead of a hand as well.

In the chaos, Harry along with a few others who weren't vomiting snuck out of the room. Once gone, Harry sucked down the antidote and stopped singing, reciting poetry, reading out grocery lists, and reciting lists of muggle phone books he'd never seen. Over all, it was a clever prank.

Harry Disillusioned himself and snuck through the staircases until he arrived at the gargoyle guardian. Instead of speaking a password,

Harry threw a confundus jinx at the beastly thing. It then thought it heard the password.

Harry snuck up and looked around at the room. With no Dumbledore, there was no phoenix to deal with. McGonagall wasn't known for having a familiar, was she?

He moved silently through the room and noted there were no books lining the walls. They were elsewhere.

Harry began casting the magic analysis spells he'd used in his second year to find the Chamber of Secrets. Eventually, he discovered a few secret spaces in the room. One nook held a pensieve, empty of anything at all. Another nook contained empty shelves. Finally, a third bookcase popped open slightly and revealed an enormous stack of dusty books inside.

Harry walked inside, pulled out a featherlight bag, and began casting the duplication spells on everything of interest. His collection of books on warding tripled. He got three more shelves worth of books on dueling and offensive magics.

There was one massive volume on Divination...which was so out of place in this particular collection that Harry decided to copy it.

The other volumes Harry copied and took with him spanned the realms of Runes, Rituals, History, Finance, Enchanting, Politics, and many other disciplines unrepresented in the Hogwarts library.

He snuck out long before Minerva McGonagall even thought about returning to her office for the evening. She was as sick as she'd ever felt, including for the births of her three children.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry decided he needed more than his own resources in order to achieve all his objectives; he needed eyes and ears in other walks of life, other countries.

He wrote letters to all his acquaintances from Hogwarts and those he met from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. He proposed a meeting a few days after Christmas to see what they could do to reduce the influence of those who ruled only through lineage, those who were utterly without redeeming merit.

He received a surprising number of acceptance letters. Harry then wrote to reserve a room at the Three Broomsticks, the largest they had, for his meeting.

The more Harry thought about it, the more he knew there would be people who would want to help.

The plan he'd sketched out in the letter was simple:

--Identify the worst offenders, those completely unsuited for their public roles

--Research proof of their incompetence

--Public humiliation, try to get public opinion to swing against these people

--Try to sway more people to the cause of rewarding only merit; destroy the blood cults, the crony cults, the corruption cults, and the other inefficient models in play

It wasn't Harry's true plan, but it was as much as he would openly admit to at this point in his life.

Still, it was a worthy first public step. Getting rid of those who hide behind their heritage – or the people they know – or their ability to ladle out bribes was a useful thing...necessary.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The day before Christmas, while Harry was reading through yet another thick book on warding, he received an unexpected letter from his Aunt Petunia. Apparently his cousin Dudley had died in a boxing

accident at school, the oddly named one that ‘Uncle’ Vernon had gone to as well.

Petunia didn’t outright state it in her few words, but she blamed Harry for the death.

Harry was honestly surprised at this, as he hadn’t even thought of Dudley since the summer.

Petunia did make it clear that the house in Little Whinging would be sold long before Harry’s second term ended and she would be changing her name. She wrote that she never expected to see or hear from Harry again.

Harry thought that part of her letter was spot on. Harry would curse his Aunt the next time he came across her – with a truth compulsion most likely. Let the bitter shrew deal with the world if she was always forced to spew her venomous thoughts for public consumption.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry used his version of the Marauder’s Map to sneak into Hogsmeade for his meeting. All the Hogwarts types he’d invited had been able to floo in from their homes over the break; Harry alone of the group had remained at Hogwarts.

The room on the third floor was surprisingly full, even more than Harry had expected. A few people offered hurried explanations of the last minute additions. Harry just nodded. He then cast a variety of wards over the room to ensure their privacy.

“Thank you, everyone, for taking a bit of time during your break to meet. As I wrote to many of you, I want to start a new campaign to bring excellence back to our public spheres, our schools, our businesses, our governments....”

The meeting lasted four hours, seven pitchers of butterbeer, and three heaping platters of sandwiches. The list compiled – along with hints of wrongdoing and bits of evidentiary proof – was enormous.

The British side of the equation was the most well documented: seven Ministry department heads, nineteen Wizengamot members, four journalists, twenty-two business owners (including the owners of six Quidditch teams).

On the French side, only the Minister and eight of his undersecretaries stood out. In Germany, most of the list was composed of Rotgat members, their version of a wizarding parliament, plus four teachers at Durmstrang.

A few other countries had some notable entries.

“Anyone have a favorite place to begin?” Harry asked.

No one had particularly strong opinions.

Harry smiled. “Well, let’s start with the partially disgraced Crouch. I have it under good authority he’s particularly gifted with the Imperius Curse...”

Hermione Granger laughed. “The former head of Magical Law Enforcement is gifted at an Unforgivable?”

Harry shrugged. “I have my sources. Impeccable in this case.”

The rest of the group agreed to Harry’s suggestion. The rest of the names got passed around and divided up amongst the group for further research.

It was dark when the last person left the room. Harry cracked open a window, transformed into a crow, and flew back to Hogwarts. Honeydukes would have closed hours ago. Harry didn’t fancy breaking into a store where just anyone could spot him doing it – not when he could just as easily fly back.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Toppling Barty Crouch had been a simple matter.

The man was hiding an escaped Azkaban prisoner no one expected was still alive. People could quickly discover that fact if just a few unusual things happened in the right sequence.

On a Hogsmeade weekend, Harry peered into the mind of the leading greengrocer in town and discovered how much food Barty Crouch's elf purchased in a given week, far more than was needed to feed an old man and an elf. He also verified that the Crouch elf purchased Quidditch magazines and posters on a fairly regular basis.

Harry thusly compelled a concerned Hogsmeade citizen to write to the DMLE about his suspicions regarding Crouch. The man had obviously taken in a young boy for some nefarious purpose: the sales records proved that Barty was caring for more than himself.

A very skeptical low level Auror secured a warrant when Crouch was at work and investigated. What he found was a man under an Invisibility Cloak attended to by an elf – a supposedly dead man who still breathed and ate and slept.

The newspapers had had a field day. Barty Crouch, suspected pedophile, had turned out to be harboring his Death Eater son...by using the Imperius Curse. Both Crouch's would presently be making their ways to cells on the island prison.

Harry set down the fourth Daily Prophet to report on the matter. The Wizengamot had rushed through a trial because of the embarrassment involved. Crouch had been the Director of Magical Law Enforcement during the first Voldemort war – and he had been using Unforgivable Curses for more than a decade now.

The paper reported the trial lasted less than an hour.

Harry set down the newspaper and turned his mind to Crouch's minion...Weatherbee. Old Percy Weasley had been ridiculous as Head Boy, so Harry took a bit of pleasure as he contemplated what he might do to the boy.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry set down his quill as he looked over the letter to Sirius. He reread the first paragraph silently.

I was wondering if I might stay with you this summer. My aunt Petunia sent me a no-nonsense letter stating she had sold her house and would be disappearing. She was never much of an Aunt so I'm not surprised in the slightest. I would like to get to know you better, perhaps learn more about my parents.

Harry had never written with more seriousness. He could find himself half a dozen more convenient situations in the world, but he really did want to get to know his godfather.

Harry couldn't stop smiling at the little hints and clues he threw in the letter.

I was surprised to see Mr. Crouch and Percy Weasley arrested. I read somewhere that you've taken up the Black family seat on the Wizengamot. I suppose it might be somewhat entertaining to sit in judgment of a man who ensured you never received a trial. Perhaps you'll tell me about it this summer.

It was just right. It should be enough to make Sirius laugh. He'd send it out tomorrow.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Sitting the OWLs after five years of classes was much simpler than everyone had led Harry to believe.

His Charms examination was the simplest thing: the practical was only seven spells Harry knew by heart. A cleansing spell; an animation spell from third year; three jinxes used in low level dueling; the spell to set up a canvas for magical portraiture; and the Granholtz Charm, one of several charms used to magically expand the size of a room.

Harry showed the men and women of the Examination Bureau things they'd never seen before when he sat his Transfiguration examination.

The chairs he transfigured into a gilded carriage earned gasps from everyone who saw them.

His Defense examination was barely a test at all. With the level of instruction so poor in this school, someone knowing the first year's book of defense lessons would earn a high pass. The official practical exam involved hinkypunks, boggarts, the countercurses to six jinxes and hexes (no curses), and a cursed door handle to get past. His work on the Patronus Line awed everyone in the room as did his solution to the cursed door handle (a golden colored ward that negated the modest curse embedded in the metal).

The rest were ridiculous. How could anyone find them challenging? The Potions exam only called for brewing a third year and a fourth year potion. The Care of Magical Creatures had only three beasts for the practical, one of which was a niffler. Couldn't they have just told everyone to tend to some flobberworms and handed out Outstanding marks to anyone who showed up?

The Runes exam had a few tricky or potentially deceptive passages, but Harry recognized one of them as a direct quotation from a temple in Crete they'd briefly studied in class. He knew, therefore, what that one at least was supposed to say.

He hid some of his knowledge of arithmancy...but the test wouldn't have stumped a particularly stupid troll.

They didn't offer OWLs in Dueling or Warding or any of the more challenging magical disciplines. Those would be real tests to take....

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry began another letter to his informal network of supporters the day before his fifth year at Hogwarts ended.

It's not enough to expose the figureheads as incompetent and corrupt if we do nothing to change the structure of power. All the European wizarding governments are based on hereditary power which is anathema to empower the meritorious. Merit and democracy can coexist, but merit and aristocracy are impossible to blend. I, for one,

continue to be surprised that the entire Wizengamot in Britain hasn't fallen to pieces under the collective incompetence of its members. Surely any other form of representative government would be preferable. Think on it for our next meeting during the summer.

He wanted to set the people who were of like mind to a big, almost insoluble problem. He'd try to solve it from multiple angles – the legal ones in public, the illegal ones more discretely.

He sent the letter out and then snuck away that afternoon. He needed to visit the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. He had a plan in mind.

His mind turned over that strange letter he'd gotten back from Sirius a month back. Sirius had, of course, been delighted to have Harry spend the summer with him, but noted how insistent that Dumbledore had been that Harry return to live with his aunt. Sirius had even attempted to explain about Petunia's disappearance, but Dumbledore didn't care.

Even away from Hogwarts, old Albus was still a thorn in Harry's side. (And why was Sirius talking with Dumbledore at all?)

Harry decided he would have to do something about Dumbledore. He cleared his mind, however, when he entered the Chamber of Secrets. He needed a clear mind when he dealt with a clever, deadly magical creature. He had a need for a quarter liter of basilisk venom and this was the only way to get it.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Sirius had one of the best and craziest ideas Harry had ever heard of: participating in a dueling tournament in Hogsmeade.

Years and years of Charms and Defense Against the Dark Arts...for what? Harry had never had a proper duel in all his time at Hogwarts. When Sirius found out he literally insisted Harry go up and participate in the one in Hogsmeade tomorrow.

Not watch...participate.

Harry wasn't big on making a fool of himself, but he gave into Sirius' entreaties after twenty minutes. The man was persistent and annoying. It turned out to be a great idea.

The tournament began the next morning with a match between Sirius and an older man who seemed to know what he was doing. Since getting out of Azkaban, Sirius had evidently taken up dueling as a hobby...so as never to be left standing like a fool in front of a weak wizard like Peter Pettigrew.

Harry laughed when a few of Sirius' spell choices did unusual things to his opponent. He blended stunners and disarming spells with other options like transfiguring the man's shoes into lead or charming the man's dour brown robes to fly into his face and attack him.

Sirius downed his opponent. Harry got to watch a few more duels before his first round.

He took the stage against a forty year old man. Both bowed and took up the position. Harry's opponent began with a stunner. Harry, like some of the better duelists he'd observed, stepped to the side and cast a jelly-legs jinx. The man shielded rather than step away from the spell. Harry smiled and began working his way through the spells he'd only ever cast for academic reasons.

Seven spells later Harry emerged the victor of the round. His opponent had a strong shield, but Harry was a much stronger, if inexperienced, wizard. Harry threw four spells to crack the shield, another to confuse the wizard, and a final two to either stun the man or disarm him. He fell to the mat stunned and without a wand.

People relied too much on magical shielding, Harry realized. He decided to examine the other duelists to see how others used such spells.

Sirius made it through his second round, although it was a much closer match. Sirius had to use many fewer of his comic spells.

Harry had a tougher second round, as well. This opponent shielded and dodged. His only problem was that he used complicated spells

with long, polysyllabic incantations. Harry went with using short, effective spells to win.

Sirius barely won his third duel, while Harry lost his. His third round opponent was magnificent: he used potentially lethal spells without hesitation; he cast faster than anyone Harry had ever seen; he didn't even need to raise a shield as he was always moved from the place where Harry sent any problematic spells. The man let a few testing spells, annoyances like itching hexes and such, impact with his body so he could avoid stunners and wand burning spells.

The man had a style. It was beyond effective. He used nine languages so he could cast his spells with a minimum of syllables. The stunner in Rumanian was barely a grunt. Harry congratulated the man and began to look for styles among the other duelists in the tournament.

Sirius lost in the fourth round to another duelist with an impeccable style. The man stuck to four spells...and Harry had never seen anyone cast those four spells with more power or ease.

The man who beat Harry lost in the sixth round. The two duelists in the seventh, and final, round were power casters...nearly bludgeoning their opponents with odd and almost cruel spell choices. None of the spells were Unforgivable, but a Bone Shattering Curse won the tournament for a wizard from Bruges.

Harry was entranced. He'd never seen anything so...intense in his life. Power. Knowledge. Pure Magic. All played out in a game that either side could win...or lose. Harry Potter was hooked.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

When his sixth year began, Harry prevailed on the new Defense teacher, plus Professor Flitwick, to start a Dueling Club. Prewett Ferguson actually had some legitimate qualifications to teach Defense, but his skills as a duelist were more academic than practical.

Harry holed up in the library again to study dueling methods and styles. He had seen a dozen different true styles at the

tournament...and all of them could be countered. Most of the finalists going back in the Dueling Annals had won their titles because of lucky shots – or because they violated their chosen styles.

Harry turned from dueling books, which he deemed as common knowledge, and went in search of more ‘specialized’ bits of magic. Magical mining, masonry spells, trade spells for building homes...and dozens of other very dusty tomes.

Harry started working on an anti-style, something that was about as unpredictable as was possible.

When the first meeting of the dueling club took place, Harry had his plan ready. He tore through the others. He used nothing lethal...nor did he use anything anyone in the room had ever heard of, including Flitwick, Hermione, and everyone in Ravenclaw. He never repeated a spell in his three rounds of duels. He never shielded.

Flitwick pulled Harry aside a few days later and asked about his style. Harry smiled.

“It isn’t a style, Professor.”

“I’d certainly call it a style. I didn’t understand anything you said.”

“Obscurity isn’t what I was going for, sir.”

The tiny Charms instructor laughed. “Could have fooled me.”

“It was meant to be unpredictable.”

“It was. It really was.”

At the next week’s meeting, the Defense Professor decided he would do some exhibition duels. Prewett Ferguson and Flitwick dueled. Then Prewett called Harry to the platform.

The talk of the school the next day was how Harry Potter had felled the Defense Professor with two spells, a sickly green spell for removing dental plaque (which caused the man to dive to the floor

even though he consciously knew it wasn't the Killing Curse) and a clothes cleansing charm that acted like heavy duty starch had seeped through every fiber of his robes. The man was bound tighter than if Harry had used Petrificus Totalus. Harry plucked the man's wand without any difficulty.

The rumors didn't die down for days. Harry had a few new competitors for unusual volumes in the library, too.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry's sixth year was probably his calmest and most enjoyable...until he received a rather odd letter from one of his circle. The Durmstrang graduate overheard an odd little story from Albania. There was a town afflicted by a strange disease. People would act oddly for a few months or so and then die, one squib had held out for eight months, but the Muggles there succumbed quickly.

Harry's mind connected the place with where Quirrel had said he'd gone vampire hunting...had Voldemort retreated there and started using the local humans and squibs as possession fodder? After years of pondering the matter, Harry had decided that Quirrel was likely the one who had attempted to kill Harry, not Snape. No matter, though, they were both horrible teachers.

It took Harry almost two weeks of letter writing to find an appropriate resource to investigate the rumors out of Albania.

Thus a small band of mercenaries took an exorcist into Albania in November. Harry's instructions were clear: "do not banish the spirit." They were only to capture and imprison the thing. If it was Voldemort, it was safer that way. Obviously killing him was problematic. He didn't die the regular way...who knew why?

Harry wanted a life without unnecessary complications. Any rumors of Voldemort needed to be dealt with.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

At Christmastime, Harry read about the successful use of the venom he'd harvested from the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets.

According to the Daily Prophet, a rash of political killings ended in France two days earlier. French Aurors learned of a secret lovenest owned by their Minister of Magic...a lovenest where just under a quarter liter of basilisk venom was sitting on a hall table as plain as day.

It matched exactly to the venom blended with the ink on the letters used to kill seven mediocre politicians who were once among the Minister's party.

The Minister's denials rang hollow. He testified under truth serum that he hadn't killed anyone and had no idea where the venom came from...but the Aurors decided the man had purchased a supply of veritaserum antidote.

Harry smiled. Barty Crouch's memories were still useful. The vile man had known about the French Minister's lovenest...and had used that knowledge a few times to blackmail the man into something or signing an agreement or exchanging some restricted Ministry secret.

Harry's circle of friends had had a bit of success exposing idiocy and corruption through more mainstream methods. The cumulative effect was becoming noticeable. Harry wasn't happy yet...but it was a start.

He had a team after Voldemort's spirit...and an incompetent in prison in France...and a witchhunt tearing through the Wizengamot for the person who'd been leaking details of secret meetings.... Was anything secret when the members didn't all learn Occlumency – and weren't subjecting each other to Unbreakable Vows?

Harry was raining terror down on incompetents from afar, without notice or much risk of detection. It was perfect.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The package from the exorcist finally arrived in April. The team had been hunting in Albania for nearly six months...but the prize was worth it.

When he touched it, Harry felt reminded of the diary he'd found in his second year, the one that had controlled that little red headed girl. Interesting.

Harry decided that this interesting bottle and the diary still in the Chamber of Secrets should become his next major research project. Well...a complement to his current project.

Since exhausting the library of its more unusual spellbooks to improve his dueling skills (odd uses of healing spells for dueling had been his last, and still yet untested, discovery), Harry had turned to trying to amass an understanding of the things he did not know...and where he might possibly go to learn them.

One book in particular discussed a variety of wizarding legends. Egyptians and the study of immortality took up a chapter; Babylon and the study of magical construction another; Greek city states and a dozen specialties, including divination and the crossing of animal breeds; the Romans and the arts of assassination and enthrallment filled four chapters (one alone on the Spartan forms of war magic); the Chinese and the development of potions through local flora and fauna; the native Americans and the use of rituals and totems to shape power; the rise of the wand and runic systems in Britain; the rise of enchantments and runes in Scandinavia.

Harry wondered if a journey or quest like this was how Tom Riddle molded himself into Voldemort. *Der Bildung*: the building of a young man.

Harry conjured up a thin journal just for keeping track of his current research projects. He'd outlined a dozen different places he needed to visit...and magics he needed to learn. The oddities surrounding Voldemort and the journal were yet another item on a growing list.

The things Harry planned to do before he made his full push into the world...still from behind the shadows.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The summer after Harry's sixth year began with him sitting in his room at Grimmauld Place and drafting a letter to his friends.

The results from this year's plans did not go well. It seems our initial successes with letter writing cannot be duplicated over the longer term. For example, we've had evidence published in Britain about three mid-level British Ministry officials who have run an influence ring. All three are still in power; none are under official investigation. Knowing the truth and acting on the truth are not in any way related to illogical wizards in this country.

What tactics might we develop to pressure the responses we want? Think on this for the coming meeting in Paris.

Harry had a list of three British Ministry workers he wanted gone, along with two corrupt reporters and a handful of disgusting Wizengamot members, the worst of the festering pile.

Legal means, humiliation, and the rest no longer worked: vermin like these people enjoyed their mediocrity and their corruption. Harry knew how to deal with vermin, didn't he?

Ambushing with words wasn't enough, just like it hadn't been enough to deal with the French Minister of Magic. Stronger measures; sterner stuff.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry walked out the front door of Grimmauld Place a few days later after all his preparations were finished.

He knew the people were guilty – unlike the French Minister of Magic, who was framed for the specific crimes he was arrested for, but not his more general incompetence and unsuitability for high office – so he just had to make it appear to everyone else that they were guilty. He'd had the misfortune to peer into the mind of one of the Ministry officials during his fifth year at Hogwarts...the people kept coming

and going like mad. The whole sordid plan was on display in her mind for anyone who cared to peer inside.

Harry walked two miles to a more run down section of the outer ring of London. It only took a few minutes to find an adequate deserted building for his purposes.

From the memories he'd glimpsed, Harry had recreated many of the lists of corrupt acts that existed in reality only in people's minds. Harry had written them down in just slightly opaqued ways, referring not to the bills passed through the Wizengamot by bribery, but by the supporter and his 'donations' and the dates of the transactions. Even a moron Auror would be able to piece it back together – what with all the bits of paper detailing this or that payment to this or that reporter or government official critical in bringing out a report demanding such and such a law.

Harry littered the building with crumpled legislative drafts and cut out stories from the Prophet – all the things bought and paid for in this room. He left three dozen empty flagons of Forgetting Potion...the perfect explanation as to why none of those soon to be tried would remember this place. Harry decided to frame up Veneta Edgecombe, the mother of a rather annoying and craven Ravenclaw who'd just graduated.

Harry stepped away two hours later after admiring the beautiful set he'd created for this little drama. Every word of what he'd left in there was true, even if the people involved were far smarter than to actually set up a meeting area like this one. But, wizards were stupid. Harry's creation would force all of them to believe.

Late that night, a rented owl dropped a letter to the offices of the Daily Prophet, specifically the night editor. A very brief suggestion named the street and building number a reporter should visit...and a warning not to inform the Aurors, as the Head Auror was implicated by the evidence there. Pius Thicknesse had been a bad boy....

The reporter went out; the story made the cover and two inside pages. All the people named were in jail within three days.

Dumbledore, with all the time in the world, now began to wonder about how such a complex network was wrapped up so easily.

He quickly determined that the evidence of corruption was compelling, but that hidey hole was too convenient. No one skilled enough to survive a dozen years running a high risk operation would be that stupid.

Dumbledore decided to do a bit more checking.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry's final dueling tournament of the summer was eight days before school resumed. He'd competed six times over the summer months and finished as high as third place, not bad at all for someone who wasn't even out of Hogwarts. Three duelists, one man and two women, were nearly impossible for Harry to beat. Decades of experience with a wand were still good for something, after all.

Harry arrived at the outdoor tournament near Queerditch Marsh. He walked over to the administration tent and saw something very interesting: Dumbledore was refereeing. He was snooping around a few of Harry's plots; he was the one who had tried to get Harry in danger with the TriWizard Tournament; he was the one who had shipped Harry off to Vernon and Petunia Dursley.

Dumbledore needed a bit of a reward, didn't he?

Luckily the tournament lasted two days...and Dumbledore would be judging tomorrow as well. Harry would have a few moments to prepare something this evening, something very special.

Harry's mind turned through all the lethal options he had available.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The final day of the tournament was among the more beautiful days Dumbledore could remember. He'd enjoyed the sun. He'd seen Harry Potter duel...frighteningly brilliant young man, using his eyes and his mind rather than just some dark grimoire of arcane spells to win. Who

knew one could win a duel with a transfigured mop and a pan scrubbing spell?

Dumbledore sat near the stage with two other judges waiting for the final round. Harry had made it all the way to the end to battle it out with a duelist from Wizarding Monaco.

Dumbledore had accepted the role of a dueling judge to fill up his days a bit and his coin purse, too. It didn't hurt that he'd be able to keep an eye on Harry Potter from time to time, as well. The boy had a destiny to fulfill...who knew when, but he still had Voldemort to vanquish, didn't he?

Harry mounted the stage and looked a young warlord of old, a wizard ready to commence combat and succeed. He really was a beautiful young man. His opponent was a grizzled old man of forty summers, who looked closer to ninety. Too many rituals; too many messy duels and wars.

The duel began. Harry led with the oddest yellow-colored spell Dumbledore had ever seen. The Monacan started with a severing charm, a spell that pushed the limits of what was allowable in this particular format.

The yellow spell seemed on dead center to collide with the Monacan before it veered to the side. Dumbledore blinked twice. That was...beyond strange. Did the Monacan possess a nonverbal spell to divert curses? Or was it something else?

Harry frowned for a moment before he sent another spell, purple and writhing with energy...another spell Dumbledore didn't recognize. It, too, diverted at the last second. Harry's frown deepened into a scowl. The Monacan wasn't dodging or shielding. Something or some spell was protecting him. Dumbledore looked at the other judges. They seemed puzzled as well.

Harry took off the gloves for his third spell. It was a combination spell – definitely not the kind of thing taught at Hogwarts. Harry simultaneously conjured seven wooden stakes and banished them at his opponent. Since they were solids, and not magic, whatever spell

of device the Monacan was using failed. The man dove to the mat, but two of the stakes grazed him.

Harry sent four spells barreling at the man. His device – for it surely wasn't a spell – diverted two of them, but the worst two of the four spells hit the man. A third arm grew from the man's chest and grabbed for the Monacan's wand. The fourth spell caused the man's eyebrows to begin growing with an alarming speed. Soon the man was temporarily blinded.

Harry continued flinging spells. The attempted cheating angered the beautiful young man. He certainly knew some odd curses, didn't he?

The match ended there, with Harry Potter as the victor. He had just qualified for the World Dueling Competition in November. Dumbledore wondered if Harry would accept the invitation to Hong Kong.

Dumbledore and the other judges stood up and waited for Harry to come accept his reward. Instead the young man walked to his fallen opponent and ripped open the man's sleeves. The Monacan had an odd device up his left sleeve. It was long, stretching all the way to the man's shoulder.

"This is how he cheated," Harry said. "I will be taking it for study as the victor of this duel." He then reached down and plucked the unconscious Monacan's wand from his loose hand. Harry snapped the thing with a sour expression on his face. "It's the lowest level of punishment for cheating in a formal duel. I am satisfied."

Dumbledore beamed. Harry did have some mercy in his body. The last time they'd spoken, Harry had seemed rather obdurate. Perhaps he was growing up...and growing more morally flexible, mercy taking the place of rigid idealism.

Dumbledore retired after the ceremony to the judge's tent. He had a hankering for cool chocolate. He snapped his fingers. "Elf, bring me a hot chocolate and a cup of ice cubes."

"Right away, sir."

The elf promptly returned and Dumbledore began dumping the concoction into a third glass he produced from his robes. The glass was charmed to detect magical poisons of every sort; Dumbledore did still have enemies and he felt a lot less safe since he'd been forced from Hogwarts.

The glass showed no warnings, so Dumbledore began to enjoy his favorite beverage. He had a sweet tooth a kilometer wide and twice as long. Lemon drops, cool chocolate, and every sort of Muggle candy...delicious.

He pondered over the Harry Potter he'd been watching. The boy had undeniable power; he had brains, too, far too sharp. Dumbledore wondered what Potter might get up to in the coming years. Something for the Light, hopefully....

He continued sipping on the hot cocoa and wondered if the caffeine was finally getting to him. His heart was beginning to race.

Suddenly, Dumbledore keeled over, his cup clattering to the ground. The great old wizard was dead.

When the magical autopsy was performed it seemed that Dumbledore had been abusing the Elixir of Life – from a Sorcerer's Stone, so Dumbledore must have made one or stolen Flamel's, the verdict said – along with a plant called foxglove. Few recognized that the Muggles had been using this herb, renamed as digitalis, for quite some time to control heart conditions.

But Harry knew.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

October snuck up on Harry in his final year at Hogwarts. Then he was shocked to get a letter from his godfather, Sirius. The man was planning to marry.

Harry eventually broke down into laughter. He loved Sirius, but who in their right mind would marry the man? Now that he had had time for

his mind to heal from Dementor exposure, he was sane, but more like a mirthsome child than an adult.

Harry turned over the letter and decided to wait a day or two to reply. He needed something enthusiastic and diplomatic at the same time.

He turned back to his other project. The loose group had taken to calling themselves the Recherche...and had also begun taking jobs in the wizarding world, entry level positions in the Ministries of Europe or in the few large wizarding conglomerates. Harry now had sources of information in nearly every corner of Europe, aside from Gringotts.

But Gringotts was a problem of its own. Harry's mind had turned and twisted over that place more and more frequently.

The goblins ensured that the wealthy and aged families stayed in power. Money, inherited wealth, ensured that one generation passed the reins to the next. The goblins took their little cut and screwed over the larger world.

Harry himself had a fair amount of wealth, but he'd used almost none of it accomplishing the things he'd done. He'd spent money only on the exorcist and mercenaries to retrieve Voldemort's spirit. The basilisk venom was freely donated; he'd otherwise paid for some potions ingredients and a bit of miscellany. Wealth was how the world kept score...for now. But, perhaps there was something Harry could do to change that. Change it into a currency more closely tied to merit and talent.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry sent back his letter of acceptance for Sirius' wedding at Christmastime. It really was a whirlwind courtship. Harry wondered if Sirius would shortly have an heir to present to the world. An unexpected pregnancy could certainly explain the rush-rush nature of the wedding.

The harder challenge was settling on a gift for his godfather. Sirius had only a few hobbies: attending dueling matches, following Quidditch, pranking his friends, and tinkering with his motorbike.

On the negative side of the equation, Sirius didn't read, not even with the massive Black Library at his disposal...nor was he interested in new spells...nor did he practice any of the magical arts, save for enchanting Muggle objects.

Perhaps enchanting really was Sirius' thing.

Harry decided to visit Harrods in London to pick out a few interesting muggle gadgets for Sirius to enchant: blenders, toasters, and the like. Sirius would enjoy enchanting them and both of them would enjoy the products of the devices. They'd not really have to cook again...or hire an insane house elf.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry looked at the small pebble on his desk. It was, so far, his greatest magical accomplishment, something that not even the goblins of Gringotts would suspect or know how to deal with. Harry had spent two months conquering the problem of inherited wealth.

He'd considered getting laws passed to limit or hinder inheritance. He knew he had a proxy vote in the Wizengamot – and so did Sirius. But, did he want to move so publicly at this early stage? His success had come from no one knowing that there was something out there pulling strings.

He'd had a detailed plot. Act one: A suggestion planted in the Wizengamot that estates without heirs should be managed by a public board for the good of the Wizarding World, for public works, orphanages, and charity. Act two of his plan on wills: the public exposure of those who killed to inherit, as Harry and his group had compiled a fairly extensive list of people who'd likely killed for money. Harry had met the most interesting people on the dueling circuit, hadn't he? People who did it themselves, people who were hired to kill, people who heard confessions of others...

Harry did scans of everyone to accumulate knowledge. He was a Ravenclaw after all.

Acts three, four, and five would have turned – hopefully – the public against inherited wealth as a public danger. But where was the fun in that? Harry's plans called for the Wizengamot to revise the inheritance rules, tax all estates for the first time, revoke wills that granted bequests to those implicated in murdering the dead person... It was elaborate and complex...and not the right thing to do.

Harry settled on the simpler solution: the pebble on the desk in front of him. This particular item had taken two months to construct, but the whole process of getting here had taken years. Harry had had to make a breakthrough in arithmancy before he could have hoped to create the tiny pebble that would become the bane of Gringotts.

Harry had not yet told anyone about his arithmantic breakthrough, although the knowledge would be enough to ensure Harry earned a Mastery in the subject. He had created a magical analysis ward. Erect the ward; throw a spell at it; then play with it to his heart's contentment. He had first worked on the stunning spell; Harry had created seven variations and documented each of them in his personal grimoire. He even used the ward to analyze the Killing Curse. He came up with three variants, all with unusual incantations. (Schilpad, Dutch for turtle, was Harry's favorite.)

But the analysis ward had proven its worth when it came time to work out how to make this pebble. Harry had thrown a transfiguration spell into the analysis ward and begun working on it. The transfiguration itself was a challenge: getting gold to transfigure itself permanently into something else. Gold and silver were notoriously difficult to influence with magic, certainly only a Philosopher's Stone could turn lead into gold. Getting gold to turn into something not quite gold was less of a challenge, but not easy.

Slowly but surely, Harry got gold – a Galleon – to transfigure itself into Leprechaun gold. It stayed transfigured long enough for the galleon to completely disappear twelve hours later.

Most of the two months of work were spent blending the new transfiguration spell with a conditional spell: the spell would only activate in the presence of gold within a certain range. That was bloody hard. Muggles had computers that lived for conditional

statements; wizard magic had a tough time doing the things Harry wanted it to do.

Eventually, though, eventually....

The magical analysis ward was a great tool. It would allow Harry to carry out his war against inherited wealth without anyone else ever being the wiser.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The wedding of the year went off without a hitch. Sirius had waited until the reception before unleashing any pranks...and the ones he'd selected were quite amusing.

Harry left after an hour and made his way to Gringotts. He got in line and requested to visit the oldest of the many Potter Family vaults. He made his way inside and put up a small device on the inside of the vault door. He also fetched a few of the books from one of the shelves. Harry left the vault and took a few steps past his vault toward the even older vault. He let a half dozen pebbles hit the floor.

He got back in the cart and began hucking pebbles every hundred feet or so on the climb back to the surface. He'd have to come back and resow the stones in a few months as the spells would wear off.

Until then, people would have a tough time with their wealth, wouldn't they? The rich folks down this branch of the many tunnels inside Gringotts wouldn't have much wealth to pass around in the future. All it would take was opening their vault doors once and all the gold would disappear in twelve hours.

Harry smiled as he exited the bank.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry spent the months following the Christmas break preparing for his NEWTs. He also kept an eye out for the articles detailing the collapse of the wizard bank. It had a few dozen users now, rather than the hundreds of families it had previously.

The stories had gotten out about the goblins shortchanging wizards: substituting leprechaun gold for the real stuff. That rumor – along with a few wizards' pensieve memories – was more than enough to ruin the goblins for the time being. Now Harry had to start dropping his charmed pebbles in other places, near where the older, wealthier families might be storing their moneys. It was more fun this way.

Harry finished his lunch and returned to his common room. He had ten NEWT examinations to prepare for, didn't he? He had gotten permission to sit a NEWT for dueling as well. A few others had decided to sit the exam, so they were working together once a week. That meeting was later this afternoon before dinner.

Harry sat down and opened his charms journal. He had seven years worth of charms to reacquaint himself with. Some of them could be so much better. Harry marked a few to place in his magic analysis ward. There had to be a better cleaning charm possible. If not, there was still no better way to really understand every bit of the magic involved. Above everything else, Harry was still a curious beast. He wanted to know how everything worked – how, why, when, where, and what, his guiding principles.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry took his NEWTs and smiled the whole way through. He decided to do quite a few showy things.

He took the three simple Potions required and created them with a few variations, which he documented and submitted. The Blood Replenisher had a neutral taste, rather than the spoiled milk taste it usually possessed; the Polyjuice Potion was thinner and easier to swallow; the Wit-Sharpening Solution used half the amount of precious, expensive ingredients and worked just as well.

He demonstrated the dozen charms in the practical all silently and all using modified versions he'd created using his magical analysis ward. None of the examiners knew what to make of Harry's improved charms: his Disillusionment Charm prevented even the Homenum Revelio spell from functioning; his Replication Charm didn't create

one new book to supplement the original, it created five; his skill with the Animating Charm had a hospital bed galloping around the testing room.

His Transfiguration NEWT left the examiners with their jaws on the floor. Harry conjured a silver goblet – and it remained for the entirety of the hour examination, unlike nearly every other attempt at creating semi-valuable metals. He conjured whatever they asked of him; he transfigured a monkey into a man (who looked rather like Cornelius Fudge) and had the man-monkey speak, dance, and run. (Although they didn't ask him to, Harry could have turned a rock into a man, as well.)

His Defense examination was a joke. There were four dangerous creatures tested on (none were werewolves or vampires); the test briefly covered counter-curses to actual curses. The 'hardest question' was being asked how to defend against Unforgivables. Harry conjured a piece of marble. It took four reductors before the examiner destroyed the thing; it likely would have survived two Killing Curses. Making a piece of stone blew the examiners away; it was nothing really, just a bite of common sense and magic.

The true revelation was Harry revealing the existence of a limited version of his magical analysis ward during his Arithmancy exam.

"What is that," Griselda Marchbanks asked.

"It's something I cobbled together."

"It's marvelous, Mr. Potter. Throw a tickling charm in it." He obliged.
"Now, can you turn the charm into something that makes people sneeze?"

He twisted his wand a few times and the spell began to change.
"Madame, would you care to name the new charm?"

She shook her head. So Harry picked a silly word and cast it on her.
"Sneezus."

The rest of the thirty minute session ran over by two hours as the examiners threw him a few more questions on the practice of arithmancy and then spent the rest of the time examining the new ward he'd created.

Harry Potter earned himself a few new converts that day.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry graduated from Hogwarts on a Thursday and began his first dueling tournament as a fully qualified wizard on a Friday. His first round opponent in Sofia was none other than his former Charms Professor, Filius Flitwick.

The match was short, but brutal. Flitwick knew not to underestimate his former student. Harry had seen his former teacher in action. Both began with devastating opening moves.

Flitwick called down lightning, intending to stun his opponent. Harry conjured eight squat golems each just a touch larger than Flitwick. Flitwick began blasting away while Harry disappeared from his side of the platform. Two of the brutes captured the tiny professor before the man released a massive burst of energy. It knocked Flitwick to the ground, but it also seemed to impact upon his invisible opponent.

Harry recovered faster and used a forestry charm on the Professor. Instantly the professor was covered in viscous sap from top to bottom. He couldn't use his hand to make any gestures. But, in the surprise, no one noticed Harry slipping into his obviously wandless magic.

Harry strode over to his former teacher and pulled the man's wand from his sap-covered hand.

"The winner," an announcer declared.

It was a good tournament, although Harry came in fourth (after suffering losses in his last two matches). It was a perfect start to his Grand Tour...of the world.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

He returned to England a few times during his first ten years out of school. He came back to track down Petunia Dursley...finding her in Leeds under the name Mabel Weschel.

He never revealed his presence to her, but he did curse the woman with the Cassandra Curse. She'd forever speak the truth as she knew it, even to the harshest degree, and receive only scorn and disbelief for what she said. He knew his aunt would never hold down a job for long...or a romantic partner.

It all suited Harry just fine. Petunia deserved every cruelty she received...she deserved far more than Harry could ever do to her.

On the lighter side, Harry also returned for the births of Sirius' three children: James Patrick, Leonidas Orion, and Lily Persimmon. (Harry became godfather to little James who was, surprisingly enough, a metamorphmagus from the age of three.)

He came back to witness the trials of a few people that the Recherche managed to topple.

When he came back for good, at the age of thirty, Harry was ready to get down to business.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

With the knowledge he'd acquired in Egypt on immortality rituals and practices, Harry quickly rounded up an even dozen horcruxes in Britain. (One looked like it was almost a thousand years old.) He took them down to the Chamber of Secrets on a beautiful June day and got down to the destruction ritual.

The British knew little about horcruxes and published even less of it. The Egyptians, however, had published much of what they knew inside burial sites – and even in their Book of the Dead. Too bad that only the magical pharaohs could use the rituals, even if every pharaoh attempted them at some point.

A few of the Egyptian's rulers probably had seemed omnipotent as a result.

Harry spent a few hours expelling the soul fragments from the trinkets he'd collected. Riddle – including the soul fragment captured in Albania – had five, a grisly record. Harry spent very little time conversing with the captive spirit before he banished the man forever. Salazar Slytherin had one, but he was a very disagreeable chap and was also quickly banished. There were another three individuals Harry had a chance to speak with, including one who wasn't yet dead (even if his soul fragment was imprisoned). Harry noted down the man's unfamiliar name and vowed to pay him a visit.

After that, Harry paid to have a complete set of Wizengamot records for the last twenty years. It was brutal, ugly reading.

Finally, he scheduled that year's session of the Recherche, to be held in the newly constructed Potter Manor. They had a lot to do if they were going to run things from the shadows.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The tall man stood up and walked to the podium. He looked out on the vast crowd in front of him. "Dreams never do come true in exactly the ways we expect them to. My father, Harry Potter, never expected to be a hero at age one or a worldwide dueling champion at age 20 or Minister of Magic at age 33 or the world's foremost magical theorist, alchemist, and architect. He is all this and more; he is my dad, my friend, and my champion. It is my pleasure and my sadness to introduce him to you...for the final time...as your Minister of Magic."

Harry looked at his son Theodore – one of six orphans he'd adopted – and smiled. The bit about dreams was very true; Harry had always hoped to rule from the shadows. There were far too many weak people attempting to claw their way to the top of the pile. He'd had to change his plan quickly.

Fudge had been a disaster; Bones had managed two modestly successful terms, before an assassin took her from power; Compton Marchess, a superior Quidditch player turned mediocre Minister, had

been impeached for embezzlement after 23 months in office; Emmanuel Abbott had served an undistinguished full term...and then Harry Potter.

“Today is the Minister’s 143rd birthday. Instead of the usual party, he asked me to invite a few people to hear him deliver a bit of an announcement. I suppose most of you are just crashing...but you’re all welcome nonetheless.”

No one ever uttered the word dictatorship, during or after Harry’s reign. Harry lost plenty of battles with the Wizard Parliament (though none were truly ever important). He put himself up for reelection every five years, usually with one or more opponents. He never won with more than sixty percent of the vote – or had less than fifty-seven percent, either.

The long speech his son delivered...a mock eulogy of sorts...wasn’t able to touch on Harry’s true accomplishments. Anyone who attempted to resurrect pureblood traditionalism died silently in the night. Anyone who got a job in the Ministry solely because his father or uncle worked there suffered a debilitating accident after proving himself incompetent at his jobs. Anyone who attempted to proclaim themselves a Light Lord or a Dark Lord usually faded away, never to be heard from again. No Headmaster of Hogwarts stayed more than seven years while Harry Potter was Minister. No one ever remained the head of the opposition party for more than four years. Harry stayed in power while everyone else around him rose and fell.

“No one knew much about my father, the man of mystery he is, although he is easily the most accessible Minister in a few hundreds years. As you’ll remember, he held open hours in Diagon Alley twice a month so that anyone could speak with him for any reason – whether a gripe about the bureaucracy or a request for a new law or complaints about taxation. I can barely stand to listen to my younger sister Portia complain...and I have no idea how my father was able to withstand the volume of complaints, minor and major, month after month. He is a greater wizard than any of us recognize, I think.”

Greater, true. Vile, even more true. Evil, absolutely.

No one saw the truly vile things Harry had done – and continued to do. No one knew that the evilest Dark Lord in history was their elected leader. He used his position to assassinate foreign leaders; to destroy fragile, if autocratic, governments; to extinguish a few hundred ancient pureblooded families.

He had a hand in forcing, from the shadows, every European government to incorporate some form of democracy. He had spilled the blood of hundred, maybe even thousands, to allow merit to flourish among wizards and witches.

“Dad is beginning to fidget, so I think it’s time I slowed down a bit to go over some of the accomplishments he’d never want to have mentioned. It took a while, but I selected a few with real meaning.

“He completed his basic reforms of wizarding governance by the time he was 36. Corrupt politicians gone; elected officials in place; well trained civil servants who swore oaths against the loss of their magic never to abuse the trust we put in them.

“By age 38, he had an active force of 300 Aurors and a reserve force of 2000 more, plus the specialized services of another 450 active and reserve hit wizards, the largest and best trained wizarding army in the world. It was enough to be able to force peace negotiations with all the simmering conflicts of the era. Peace through strength and resolve.

“At age 43, my father announced the first budget surplus the Ministry had ever had. In the past, deficits from taxation had been filled in by wealthy patrons who wanted special consideration. Since then, the Ministry has fully funded itself. No one can buy a favor any longer.

“Not to rest on merely political laurels, he announced his creation of a Sorceror’s Stone at the age of 46. My father is the first master alchemist since Nicholas Flamel.”

Harry had to smile at this. He’d been proclaimed a master alchemist for the feat, even though all he really did was manage to reverse engineer what Flamel had done so many years ago.

“He stood tall and proud when he adopted the first of what would be six orphans at age 47.” The audience laughed at this. Harry’s son was obviously referencing himself.

Harry had studied enough history to know that powerful leaders were felled by military stupidity, gross hubris, or by traitors close to them, such as wives. Harry wanted children, had a new mistress every few months, but wanted no wife to endanger him.

“He presided over the ceremony that named Sirius Black Chief Magistrate of Britain – the first time the legislative and judicial branches had ever been truly separate in Britain. Harry was 49.

“Harry announced, under some duress, that he had a few pseudonyms when he was 52. One was a best-selling muggle fiction writer.” More laughs. “Another was a top magical theorist with seven books to his name (two of which had become standard reading for NEWTs at Hogwarts and Beauxbatons). A third identity was revealed to be the recent winner of the public contest to construct the New Ministry Building.

“Harry Potter, Magical Architect. One of three finalists, Harry’s plan called for moving the Ministry out of London and into Wales. As you can see all around us, it called for a heavily warded valley, the creation of infrastructure for a town if anyone cared to move there, and the ministerial, judicial, and public library buildings to be built...above ground, for the first time in six centuries.

Harry thought of the losing options. One had called for refurbishing the old Ministry location, which was little better than changing out the paint; and the other proposed clearing out Knockturn Alley and building the structure there, with only an atrium above ground. Why did wizards like burrowing underground like some common animal?

The list of accomplishments continued well past the point when anyone would be embarrassed. Harry waited for his son to finish and then stood.

“Thank you all. It has been my privilege....”

Harry retired that day, but he still stuck around. He became the Chief Magistrate a few years later. He continued his strong arm tactics...he continued to be the power in Britain. Immortal, brilliant, ruthless, and wealthy....and beloved for all that he had done.

Harry could never be the power fully in the shadows, not when it was much easier to be the power visible (partially) to everyone. His tactics, his resolve, made him the most successful dark lord in history. Not the one with the highest body count or the most fearsome reputation...but the only one to fully and totally enact his own agenda.

Harry won. Harry would always win. And the people loved him for it.